

# Outreach *after* Katrina

After Hurricane Katrina, the UNC School of Public Health rallied to help its Southern neighbors. Students, staff, faculty and alumni raised more than \$12,670 for the American Red Cross' relief efforts in the area.

Additionally, the School provided shelter and study opportunities for 21 displaced Tulane University students — 13 residential students (including six Ford Foundation Fellows) and eight distance education students. The School also welcomed four international Hubert H. Humphrey Fellows who were studying at Tulane when Katrina hit.

The School's Office of Global Health and N.C. Institute for Public Health helped relocate many of these students, even providing clothing and apartment furnishings for some. Read on for other Hurricane Katrina stories.

## Lessons learned in UNC Schools of Public Health and Medicine prepare physician to respond in Hurricane Katrina's wake

As the water from Hurricane Katrina was rising outside Touro Hospital in New Orleans, several medical workers tried to convince Dr. Richard Vinroot to give up on the stroke victim he was trying to save. The woman needed a tube inserted down her trachea so she could breathe, and there was no anesthesia, no electricity, nothing at all except the doctor's hands and the plastic tube.

"I almost was not able to get the tube down her trachea," Vinroot says. "Some of the others said, 'Rich, you've got to let her go,' but I just couldn't. And eventually I was able to insert the tube so she could breathe. The next day, we got her out on a helicopter, and now, she's somewhere in Houston, and she's alive."

Vinroot, a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Schools of Medicine and Public Health, was a second-year emergency room resident at Charity Hospital in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina roared into the city Aug. 29, 2005.

"I was off the day the storm hit, staying with some friends," he says. "They evacuated, but I decided to stay and see what I could do to help. I went to Touro Hospital because it was near my house."

About 200 patients were in Touro when Katrina struck. Doctors, medical staff and other hospital workers tended to them as best they could without electricity, water or most of the modern medical equipment they had previously taken for granted.

"It really became a scary situation," Vinroot says. "Every day, the water got higher and there was less and less help as people left to deal with their own families. You couldn't blame them. We were evacuating people as fast as we could, but we were carrying some people down nine flights of stairs because there were no working elevators. Everybody pitched in – even the security guards and cafeteria workers."

Eventually, all the patients were evacuated from Touro Hospital. Vinroot, however, was evacuated to Baton Rouge, La., to work



PHOTO BY DR. KRISTY BUIJS

Dr. Richard Vinroot tends to a patient in a tent hospital set up at the New Orleans Convention Center following Hurricane Katrina.

triage. However, he couldn't get the people of New Orleans out of his mind. So he hitched a ride back to the waterlogged city via a medical convoy and proceeded to provide medical treatment to patients waylaid at the Superdome and the airport. Later, he joined the city's search and rescue effort.

"I think I was better prepared than most of the people I was working with to face a situation like this because of my training at the (UNC) School of Public Health and the Med School," says Vinroot. "A lot of managing health care in a disaster is taking a team approach, and knowing you need to integrate with the military, local public health officials, local sanitation officials. This is not just a doctor/patient, one-on-one situation – we all have to work together."

Vinroot is one of an increasing number of medical students who earn a master's degree in public health (MPH) as well as a medical degree (MD). Most earn the

MPH in Health Care and Prevention, offered through the School of Public Health's Public Health Leadership Program ([www.sph.unc.edu/phlp/](http://www.sph.unc.edu/phlp/)).

"About 20 percent of the UNC Medical School students are now getting their MPH along with their MD," says Dr. Russ Harris, professor of medicine in the School of Medicine and adjunct professor of epidemiology in the School of Public Health. "It helps them understand the needs of an entire population, as well as the needs of individual patients. That's what Rich was able to do so well in New Orleans. Putting the two degrees together is great preparation for a life of service."

Vinroot, 35, first graduated from UNC-CH in 1993 with a bachelor's degree in Southern History. He then went back to his hometown, Charlotte, N.C., and worked as a portfolio manager.

"But I just wasn't happy," he said. "I had always wanted to be a doctor. I just hadn't had the self-confidence to go for it." But with encouragement from his father, Richard Sr., former mayor of Charlotte, and his mother, Judy, a public school teacher, he went back to school. He completed his MD in 2003 in Emergency Medicine, and his MPH in 2004 in Health Care and Prevention, with a Global Health Certificate.

Following Hurricane Katrina, Vinroot says he tried to return to his residency program at Charity Hospital, however the state closed it. He then went to work in New Orleans' convention center military tent hospital, and, when needed, took on ambulance and medical helicopter shifts and shifts at a clinic across the Mississippi River.

Since it is unlikely Charity Hospital will reopen, Vinroot says he'll have to find somewhere else to finish his Emergency Room residency. However, he looks beyond these immediate problems and sees the big picture.

"So many people lost everything in this storm," Vinroot says. "I was lucky – I gained a thousand times more than I ever lost. And I keep thinking about how we'll do it better next time, wherever that is. And I know this will happen again somewhere, and I'll be there."

- By Ramona DuBose

# Saving dogs, cats – and alligators?

## Pets and livestock all part of disaster management

Bill Gentry knew he'd be helping rescue dogs, cats, horses, and some cattle as the coordinator for volunteer animal rescue in Mississippi following Hurricane Katrina. He also wound up helping rescue donkeys, rabbits, iguanas, chickens, geese and ducks as well. But alligators?

"I'm not sure where the two alligators came from," said Gentry, a veteran of numerous disaster management relief efforts and the director of the community preparedness and disaster management program in the department of health policy and administration at UNC's School of Public Health, "but we're pretty sure they weren't pets."

Gentry led a 12-person team from North Carolina in coordinating the delivery of supplies, medicine and

veterinary care to Mississippi animal shelters and clinics impacted by the storm. The team also managed delivery of the donated goods that arrived from around the country, including dog and cat food, bales of hay and even fencing.

"People have been overwhelmingly generous," said Gentry, a former state emergency management official. "We had palette upon palette of donated supplies."

Gentry and his team were called to Mississippi as part of a cooperative effort among states to assist each other with disaster relief. Called SART (State Animal Response Team), the group consists of animal experts, including veterinarians, and typically provides relief for 10 to 14 days. North Carolina has been a national leader in animal rescue disaster manage-

ment, thanks in large part to Gentry's training programs. But it's never easy.

"We were fortunate that volunteers from other neighboring states came in before us and helped out," said Gentry, "but there was still plenty of work for us to do."

Gentry said the biggest challenge was exhaustion. Many of the animal rescue volunteers worked non-stop.

Nearly 1,000 animals were rescued and placed in temporary shelters, where they stayed until they were recovered by owners or placed for adoption. The SART team also helped veterinary clinics impacted by the storm reestablish their practices.

"Some the clinics were completely devastated," Gentry explained, "and so a temporary facility had to be set up for them. In other cases, the structure itself wasn't damaged, but the practice was disrupted because customers had fled before the storm. The aftereffects of the storm are just enormous."

Bill Gentry, of the UNC School of Public Health, leads a donkey to shelter. Gentry was the coordinator for volunteer animal rescue efforts in Mississippi following Hurricane Katrina.



PHOTO BY CHRIS PENNINGER

Gentry said it's personally satisfying to assist in the animal rescue side of disaster management, in part, because of the immediate impact.

"It's very rewarding to see people reunited with their animals," said Gentry. "There's an immediate return on the work that you're doing that is often unique in disaster situations."

The work can also get personal in ways a veteran disaster management professional doesn't anticipate. During Hurricane Dennis, Gentry befriended a 2-year-old Dalmatian and later brought it home for adoption.

But even volunteers like Gentry have their limits.

"Before I left for Mississippi, my wife said, "Honey, be safe and come home soon. But don't bring back any more animals, please."

- By Gene Pinder

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