

October 2, 2020

Serving those who can not help themselves. A Letter to the Editor

By Amy Donald

Executive Director of Autism Services of SWLA and Direct Care Inc., Lake Charles, Louisiana

Three days after Hurricane Laura, I received a call from what I recall as an angel coming to my rescue. Brandi Balagny, a BCBA from Houston Texas, introduced herself and said "I am here to help, I have friends who want to help. We made it though Harvey and I remember the stress and challenge of taking care of individuals with developmental disabilities in a time of devastation. We are here for you and your agency." There have never been words so welcomed after a week of worry and concern of taking care of the residents at Autism Services of Southwest Louisiana (ASSL).

One week before this call, Hurricane Laura ripped through southwest Louisiana affecting almost every single dwelling in our community. Four of those homes are owned and operated by Autism Services and are home to adults ages 25-55 on the autism spectrum. Storm damage to the homes caused these residents to be homeless. I have learned in times of disaster, the most vulnerable populations are often overlooked. We can easily gather up our families and head to safety, but not everyone has the independence or ability to make this happen without proper support. Fortunately at Autism Services, there is a team of people who would never leave our residents' side , especially in a time of emergency.

As soon as the mayor announced a mandatory evacuation, families began coming to get their loved ones from the four ASSL homes. Several of our residents do not have family alive or in near proximity or do not have the capability of caring for their loved one alone due to age or physical limitation. Direct support staff had already committed to being with these clients through the storm. Little did we know, it would be a category 4 hurricane and recovery would be long term. Clients were evacuated to hotels north of Lake Charles and weathered the storm. Once it was safe to leave, clients were transferred to friends and family in Lafayette and Baton Rouge until temporary housing could be secured. I knew this would be a long time frame and I did not want our adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder trapped in a hotel room for a long period of time. That would not be quality of life for them. Our team started calling realtors and friends from Lake Charles to Baton Rouge and fortunately secured the last two homes in Jennings, La. I was thrilled to find housing in Jennings since my husband was from the community and we were already familiar with the town and its people. I knew the community was focused on caring for others. I knew the people of Jennings would rally around my people.

The first home I toured and explained my story, the landoard handed me the keys and said start moving in before a deposit was collected. By the time we arrived that afternoon, dishes were in the kitchen and chairs were available for sitting. The second house I rented, the realtor said I was the 200th call and most calls were not going through. My call happened to reach her. I rented the house not knowing it was owned by my neighbor in Lake Charles. She brought me the key that same day.

Marian Cannon, an ASSL board member and former resident of Jennings, quickly rallied the troops. First Baptist Church of Jennings came to the rescue and in three days fully furnished two homes for our clients and staff. I looked at Brian Wells, Pastor at First Baptist Church of Jennings, in the hallway of the home after moving in and we both cried. The love, compassion, and support was overwhelming. And remember the angel from Houston? Well, she continued to drive from Houston to Baton Rouge collecting donations to fill the houses with bathroom, kitchen supplies, bedding, games and even a WiFi router. She brought food and gift cards-truck load after truck load. My clients were settled and happy and I could now focus on rebuilding their homes. September was a long month of tears and exhaustion yet there have been so many glimmers of hope and love. Thank you to everyone who recognized the need to help those with different abilities in our community who can not help themselves in times of disaster and for giving your heart to our work and mission.

Even those who you have never met can make a huge impact in an instant. Let us all remember to be grateful for the blessings and generosity we receive during our hard days and months ahead as we rebuild and make Lake Charles even stronger! Today, I am especially thankful for the health and safety of all those we serve at Autism Services and Direct Care, Inc. and all those who made that possible!

