

Temporary diversion becomes permanent passion

For the past two years, Shoba Mansukhani Brown '71 of Maryville has volunteered her time to the American Red Cross helping victims of natural disasters. From hurricanes in Florida to floods in New York, Kansas and Minnesota, Brown is willing to lend a hand.

When her husband, long-time Northwest administrator and former State Rep. Everett W. Brown died, instead of sitting around, she inquired – on a whim – about being a volunteer for the American Red Cross.

“I signed up, took classes and within a couple of weeks I was on my way to Florida to help with Hurricane Wilma,” she said.

Although she was there to help victims of the hurricane, she, too, received help by momentarily forgetting about the loss and sadness in her own life.

“Besides making friends, working and having fun doing that, I found that helping somebody else made me forget about myself,” Brown said. “Volunteering in this capacity requires a lot of giving of yourself, but it comes back to you in so many ways.”

The United States is divided into eight Red Cross service areas, and when a disaster occurs, the local chapter springs into action. Brown, a member of the Northwest Foundation Board of Directors, is a volunteer with the Midland Empire Chapter in St. Joseph. She said oftentimes a disaster quickly escalates beyond the local chapter’s means and resources, at which time trained volunteers from the chapter’s service area are brought in to assist. In a major situation, as was the case with Hurricane Katrina, volunteers from across the U.S. are recruited.

Brown said one challenging aspect about being a volunteer is knowing how to act and react when thrown into a disaster situation for the first time.

“Each situation is unique, and we can’t tell the clients that we’ll take care of everything because we can’t,” she said. “It’s almost like applying a Band-Aid. We respond to the immediate emergency, help them get their bearings by providing



With a comforting smile and encouraging words, Shoba Brown enjoys providing assistance to those in need.

shelter, food and some financial assistance, counsel them and direct them to other agencies, churches and FEMA.”

Brown, who “got to clean toilets in a shelter my first time out,” said one of her favorite responsibilities while on a deployment is driving the ERV, the emergency response vehicle. The mobile feeding unit also is used for bulk deliveries and as an on-site office for case workers and healthcare workers. The ERV drivers are the first to enter the disaster-ravaged areas and often are the ones to find unserved or affected areas and pass the information on to the Red Cross headquarters.

“It’s gratifying and humbling to be able to bring some comfort, offer a moment of respite and refreshment, give someone a chance to talk or perhaps put a smile on someone’s face,” Brown said.

While all victims of natural disasters are grateful for the help they are given by the Red Cross, Brown has observed that there are those who are sometimes reluctant to accept any help.

“There is a sense of pride in these people,” she said. “They will try and help themselves or go to family and friends first. We try to let them know that the help isn’t charity, but a gift from the American people made possible by donations from people just like them.”

The desire to help others in need is something that Brown doesn’t see changing in her life.

“I think Red Cross volunteers are a peculiar breed of people,” she said. “We choose to work 12 to 14 hours a day. Many times we sleep on narrow cots in crowded shelters listening to a symphony of snores. However, we meet people from all walks of life, and every disaster I’ve been to has resulted in lasting friendships. This really gets into your blood.” ■



When the community of Winona, Minn., was devastated by a flood, Shoba Brown and her Red Cross cohorts were there to lend a helping hand.



Shoba Brown and her Red Cross partner, fellow Bearcat Kevin Connell '74, were overwhelmed with emotion when the residents of the disaster-struck neighborhood they were assisting presented the pair with a plaque to express their sincere appreciation.

For more information about getting involved in the American Red Cross, visit www.redcross.org/donate/volunteer/.