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Slowly, but surely ...

By **Cliff Kolovson**/ Special To The Town Crier
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Last week a small trio representing Wayland traveled to Waveland, Miss., to help in any way they could with cleanup and recovery in this small coastal city on the northern shore of the Gulf of Mexico - the point of landfall for Hurricane Katrina on Aug. 29, 2005.

It's been nearly nine months since the monstrous category 5 hurricane struck the area, and just a few weeks until the start of the next hurricane season. Recovery, it appears, still is in the very early stages. Little rebuilding is evident. Mostly, work continues to clean up the destruction as plans begin for rebuilding.

Homeowners only recently have been getting insurance settlements or FEMA payments if they qualify. Many people still are unsure of where they stand and what they'll receive. The city continues negotiations with federal and state agencies for help even while massive trucks rumble through the streets hauling away the concrete rubble, downed trees and ruined appliances.

Wayland residents Tom Fay and Cliff Kolovson and Wayland Police Officer Tom Galvin visited as part of the Wayland to Waveland Hurricane Katrina Disaster Relief group, a public/private partnership to aid the small Gulf Coast city. While they each paid their own way, donations from dozens of Wayland residents paid for supplies to aid Wavelanders in need.

One objective of this third trip was to continue aiding an elderly resident of Waveland. At 78 years old, Miss Hazel Tracey was flooded out of her home that sits nearly a mile inland. She's living in a FEMA trailer - a small, stuffy camper, really - that sits beside her house that is completely bare inside now after relief workers cleaned out the wet wall and ceiling boards, the furniture and carpeting. The Army Corps of Engineers cleared the debris from her yard including the remains of some grand shade trees, leaving her lot clear, but quite barren, rutted and open.

The second Wayland group that visited in February - steering committee co-chairs Pam Lesser, Cindy Lombardo and Kathie Steinberg along with Steinberg's daughter Sara and Wayland residents Lonnie Swarz and Nancy Romanow - met Tracey and bought her a small patio set with an umbrella to give her shade while sitting outside. But the yard was uneven and soft. The men were now charged with building her a small patio area or a deck on which the patio set could sit.

Fay, another steering committee co-chair, plus Galvin and Kolovson had no tools or truck and weren't sure how they would build anything resembling a deck or patio. They got lucky first by finding a wooden deck frame on site - broken, but repairable. They also got lucky in connecting with "Miss Melanie," Tracey's very dedicated next-door neighbor who tapped her family for a pickup truck, power tools and more.

Another neighbor helped the men level the yard with a front-end loader. They then moved the old frame, repaired it, and bought and installed new decking planks. They added some simple steps and handrails. Finally, they assembled the new furniture and put it all out for a test run. It all fit perfectly.

Three Other Projects

The men went to help, and, in fact did at least three other projects while in town. They also met with Waveland Mayor Tommy Longo who Fay had met with back in Wayland last October when this relief effort kicked off.

The three men next called on the Reynolds family which the Kolovson family had befriended in the "Dear Santa" campaign last holiday season. One of the goals of the Wayland to Waveland effort is to establish one-on-one relationships. The letters from Waveland families provided amazing stories of need and hope.

The Reynolds fared better than most. Their home, only two years old and three or four miles away from the shore, had only about 4 feet of water inside after the storm. Of course, that ruined flooring, wallboard, furniture and appliances. A relief agency had replaced sheetrock, and FEMA (after seven months) gave them a settlement. But they were doing all the work themselves, on weekends. So they still are not in the house.

The Wayland team went on to meet a gentleman who lived nearer the coast named Robert who survived the storm in his house with his four dogs. They had scurried into the attic to escape the rising water. He nearly had to exit through vents in the wall ends and climb up on the roof. The water receded after four hours, but the roads were impassible even on foot with daylight fading. He spent that night on a soggy couch with the animals until help arrived.

Robert needed the wiring pulled from the rafters where he couldn't reach to get ready for

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replacements and new wallboard. He and his wife have been living in their trailer next to the house much of the time. The whole neighborhood is mostly abandoned or destroyed around him. Robert remains determined and hopeful.

The final job was a dirty one. Cleaning out a ditch behind the Civic & Cultural Center that Wayland to Waveland hopes to help revive. Much of debris in the ditch and on the grass were items washed out from the neighboring library - videos, books, pictures in frames, mixed in with insulation and wallboard. It had been sitting there since the storm, soaked and rotting anaerobically. The men moved approximately 8 to 10 cubic yards, like a dump truck load of mulch.

Mayor's Optimism

Mayor Longo is a whirlwind. His hoarse voice immediately tells of tense, detailed meetings, and his face broadcasts the weariness of intense travel, trailer living, and keeping up with his boys' soccer and baseball activities. The two dozen caps, T-shirts and other keepsakes in his office speak silently of widespread support.

Mayor Longo does not dwell on the carnage and sad stories. He reports progress and potential. The Lowe's that broke ground last September, only a month after the storm, is nearly ready to open. Home Depot has contracted to build nearby. A much-needed supermarket chain is nearly ready to commit to Waveland. And, just the day before, Mayor Longo was meeting with federal officials on an aid package to rebuild the town's economy.

Galvin had a unique experience. As a police officer, he reached out to a counterpart in Waveland. After a hard day's work, he showered and went back to town in the evening to ride shotgun for part of a shift. He helped nab a bad guy that Waveland officers were chasing all day (they went flying by the Wayland men's work site earlier), and he learned a lot about the problems facing Waveland law enforcement.

The force is depleted as there is little money to pay officers. Those on duty get little break and less vacation. And they are up against new crimes - mostly drugs - that come with the transient workers.

Final Thoughts






As important as any work project, Fay wanted to be sure to worship with those in town on Sunday morning. While Galvin stayed in the car and tried to catch up on lost sleep from his night duty with the local police, Kolovson accompanied Fay to the Catholic mass at 8:30. They were among four out-of-town visitors in the tiny Quonset hut serving as a makeshift church. The sermon, of course, related to Katrina and the newest casualty - the church's historic private school closing.

This is clearly a community that has suffered more than is obvious. It will suffer quite a bit more as the rebuilding process continues, the men agreed. There is a lot to be done, and a wide range of contributions will be sought over a very long time if spirits are to be kept up.

The Wayland to Waveland group is maintaining a Web site at "www.waylandtowaveland.org" and will publicize its activities and needs locally. They expect some effort will be made to link up with other communities across the county that have pledged support to Waveland simply because of its unique notoriety as the point of landfall for Katrina. Together they might focus their energy into serious power to help.

Cliff Kolovson is a 22-year Wayland resident who has been active in community service projects (e.g., Hannah Williams playground restoration). He also is a former journalist with more than 15 years as a writer, photographer and editor on community newspapers (including two now owned by Community Newspaper Company). He later served a decade as a marketing communications executive for Eastman Kodak, and most recently has owned his own marketing communications business in Wayland.

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