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Reflections from Waveland

Thursday, December 22, 2005

Five volunteers from Wayland - Sean Gibbons, Pam Lesser, Cindy Lombardo, David Lombardo and Kathie Steinberg - flew to Waveland, Miss., on Saturday to view firsthand the effects of Hurricane Katrina on Wayland's sister city.

Wayland's truckload of household goods to outfit FEMA trailers and holiday gift boxes donated by the Wayland Angels arrived the day before. They flew down in time to assist with the sorting and distribution of these goods.

The devastation is incomprehensible, according to the group. It is so widespread in that it goes on mile after mile after mile. But the spirit of Wayland's sister city is strong, and their determination to rebuild is contagious.

"My first impression was one of total disbelief. The pictures we had seen before coming didn't convey the magnitude of destruction, and those we'll bring home with us won't either," explained Cindy Lombardo.

"People have lost absolutely everything. The physical devastation is total and complete. Yet through it all, these people are so grateful to have survived," added Pam Lesser.

The group also arranged to fly Waveland Mayor Tommy Longo's family down from Maine to Mississippi for a surprise holiday visit. Longo's family had evacuated to Booth Bay Harbor, Maine, and this was the first time back to see the extensive damage brought on by Hurricane Katrina.

"As we drove the Longos into Waveland, what struck me was that the city they called home was no longer recognizable, as all the family landmarks were gone," Kathie Steinberg said. "Their silence spoke volumes. After an emotional reunion with the mayor, it was heartwarming to be reminded that despite all of the loss, being together as a family was the ultimate Christmas gift."

Over the next two days the group attended church services, purchased and delivered additional gifts as part of Project Santa, visited two schools, met with public safety and town officials, and volunteered at Christmas on the Coast where they talked to many Waveland residents.

David Lombardo and Wayland Police Officer Sean Gibbons, president of the Wayland Police Association and Policeman's Union, accompanied the Waveland police on their afternoon detail.

"I've seen L.A. riots, massive fires, and loss of life. But nothing compares to the devastation that I've seen here," said Officer Gibbons.

"I've gotten more out of what I've experienced here these last three days than I've learned during three years of college," said David Lombardo. "There's no question that I'm coming back. The people I've met have made Waveland a part of my life now, and hopefully the people of Wayland will continue to make it a part of their life as well."

The group also reminded many of the residents to expect Christmas packages from approximately 90 Wayland families who recently stopped by the Wayland Public Safety Building to pick up a Dear Santa letter written by a Waveland family who told their story and described some of their needs.

"When our Steering Committee met this past fall, we committed ourselves to a long-term relationship with Waveland, Mississippi. It is clear, viewing things firsthand, that no lesser commitment is necessary," said Steinberg. "The needs of this community are extensive."

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