

# 'Real Help': One Iowan's Perspective

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Normally, Iowans make the transition from rainy springs to hot and humid summers without much notice. This year, however, summer rather eluded us. Instead, we enjoyed scenic views of water *everywhere!*

I live on the tallest hill in the city of Des Moines and was surrounded on two sides by nothing but water. We were safe (the whole state would have to flood before we'd be under water), but the only part of the industrial area to the west of us that could be seen were the roofs of warehouses and the tops of three Des Moines Metro Transit buses that weren't rescued before the levee broke. To the north, only the tops of businesses and houses could be seen; some were totally lost to the floodwaters.

Before the Flood of '93, a friend and I had been at the Greater Des Moines Grand Prix (an annual event) all day Friday and Saturday, July 9 and 10. We positioned ourselves at a strategic corner of the race on Saturday afternoon, very near the Locust Street Bridge, which crosses the Des Moines River. The race in progress was a favorite for the crowd. Our own mayor Pat Dorrian had joined the professional drivers this year and was doing quite well. Suddenly, without warning, the crowd grew tense and deathly quiet. I stopped taking photos of the race and began looking around, wondering what was wrong. I happened to look in the direction of the steadily rising Des Moines River, just in time to see someone's complete home hit the concrete bridge with such an impact that it burst into millions of splintered pieces. It was as if the house exploded from a bomb. The splinters were promptly sucked under the water and continued traveling with the current. The two docks and motorboat that followed were anti-

climatic. They, too, followed the same fate of the house. The crowd remained quiet for a long time afterward.

## Evacuation and Breached Levees

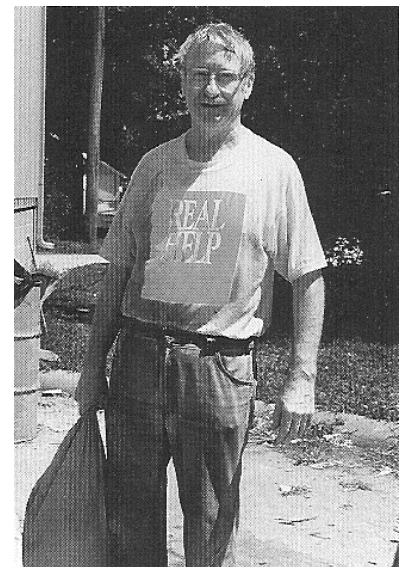
Later that evening, I joined friends at Johnnie's Hall of Fame, a local watering hole on Court Avenue. Shortly before midnight, the lights were turned on and an announcement was made. The levee had broken and the water was closing in. We had to evacuate. The floodwaters came fast and hit hard. By 2 a.m., the place I was standing in just two hours earlier was more than waist high in water.

Around the same time, the waters had nearly breached the levee that protected our city's water supply on Fleur Drive. Radio announcements were made that the water supply was to be shut down - "don't drink the water." Needless to say, our next week was spent keeping enough water in the house to supply only our basic needs. It's amazing how much water it takes to flush a toilet — people drained hot water heaters for water, caught rainwater, even drained waterbeds, and conserved where they could.

When the levee broke, the water also took out a power substation that supplied the downtown area — downtown Des Moines was without electricity. The hotel where my daughter, Elizabeth, works supplied bottled water to its guests, while making arrangements to provide them a way out of the city — all by flashlights. Can you imagine leaving the 22nd floor of a hotel by the stairway in pitch darkness? The downtown area was shut down, except for emergency personnel, for almost a week by order of the City Council. Our company ran on its electricity from an emergency generator, even after the electricity was restored.

## Thanks to Our City Council

Luckily for the citizens of Des Moines, we have an able and competent City council, which mobilized with unbelievable speed and effectiveness. By 2 p.m. Sunday afternoon, we had water trucked in by the National Guard; a special edition of our *Des Moines Tribune* newspaper was being produced on Omaha, NE, and Indianola, IA, presses — collectors' items, to be sure; plans were being developed to "rescue" our water supply; constant updates were made on road closings; Kybos (portable toilets) were everywhere — over 10,000 of them; and the Council, along with the Governor's office, seemed to be working round the clock during the following week.



Even Central Life President D.T. Doan assisted with the company's 'Real Help' Neighborhood Recovery Campaign. 'Real Help' adopted two neighborhoods in Des Moines and West Des Moines, providing aid to residents and Central Companies' employees alike. Photo by Ann Moore, Photographer.

In addition to the Council's efforts, farmers in neighboring towns not affected by the flood started appearing in shopping mall parking lots by the dozens, bringing huge containers of drinking water and not restricting the amount they gave you. Anything clean and portable was used by residents to transport water.

### **The Central Companies Neighborhood Recovery Center**

The company I work for, Central Life, along with its subsidiaries that together are known as the Central Companies, opened a Recovery Center in Valley Junction after the waters receded. Valley Junction is a historical area, but it's also an area stricken with poverty and was hit hard by the flood — some houses were totally under water. Many residents lost everything but the structure.

One week after I returned to work, I volunteered for "one day" at the Recovery Center. I didn't return to work until four weeks later. There was no way I could leave the residents of Valley Junction while there was so much to do, and thankfully I had an understanding boss who accommodated my requests for *just one more week*.

The Recovery Center workers, with their white and bright orange *Real Help* T-shirts, coordinated all the volunteer efforts for the Valley Junction area. Even the United Way agencies referred people to us for information. I dubbed the center "Information Central." We were the primary receiving and distribution center for cleaning supplies. Generous people from as far away as Puerto Rico, New York and Florida donated and shipped supplies for the flood victims. Donations of all types of needed supplies arrived in abundance.

And people came from all over — from as far west as Colorado and as far east as Florida. Victims of Hurricane Andrew who hadn't even completed rebuilding their own homes came to help. Children prodded their parents to help, bringing complete families from neighboring states to volunteer in the clean up for days at a time. Church groups were out in force, working together to help clean up and rebuild. We received busloads of people wanting to help — on one Saturday, we gave work assignments

to over 300 people who traveled from Rochester, MN, to volunteer their time. The wealth of human kindness in this time of need was overwhelming.

However, the most surprising people were the flood victims! I've never seen such strength and perseverance as I did during those four weeks. They remained cheerful, hopeful and made us laugh many times when we were down. I have a note at home that I'll always cherish — it's from a family of four I helped get a new hot water heater for their house and someone to blowout the water in their pipes, so they could have their gas turned on. It simply said, "Pat, we didn't think they gave you time off. Thanks for everything."

Everyone worked together to clean and rebuild. I can't believe the many friends I made during those four weeks — especially with some of the volunteers. Though our center hours varied, there was a core group of us who worked from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the center every day, including weekends. Then we'd move the laptop computer to Sulley's, a neighborhood lounge, and work until 11 p.m. or midnight updating the status list of the flood victims. We sometimes averaged 82 hours a week.

### **Emotions Ran High**

The saddest sight was the children — small toddlers with the saddest, most bewildered eyes. Elizabeth worked at the center several days. After the first day, she remarked about the children, "There's no way you can miss their sadness, mom." She donated a collection of stuffed animals she had gathered over many years. "They need them more than I do, mom!" She was right. You cannot imagine how bright their little eyes became at the sight of a fuzzy new toy. I overheard one mother who was telling a Recovery Center worker how she couldn't get her two-year-old daughter to quit crying over her lost doll. I asked her to wait and found an ugly but cuddly doll that had been donated in a bag of toys. When I handed it to her, she thought it was the prettiest doll she had ever seen and assured me through her tears that her daughter would love it as much as her lost doll.

At the end of the four weeks, I was physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted; but it was

the best four weeks I've ever spent and time I'll always remember. There's no way I can relate all that I experienced during those four weeks; but in the years to come, when I think back on "the Flood of '93," it won't be all the water I'll remember. It won't be the Kybos or the long hot and very humid hours I spent at the Recovery Center either. I'll think about the young woman who came into the center one evening just before closing. She looked very tired and without hope, for she had been to many places looking for help, without success. Her husband was working two shifts to make ends meet and couldn't help clean up. They had two small children at home, and she was pregnant.

I invited her to sit down and, as she did, she slowly returned my smile. I reassured her that we were there to help and took a work order on all her needs. Afterward, she went to our loading dock and took all the cleaning supplies she needed — we didn't limit her. As the men on the dock loaded her car with the supplies, she returned and threw her arms around me. She let all the tears of anguish and frustration from the several previous days stream down her face. We stood like that in the middle of the empty Recovery Center for what seemed hours. All I could do was hold her and let her cry. I can't even begin to imagine the pain she had suffered in losing everything she owned. Or the pain she would continue to endure while trying to rebuild what little she and her family had. That's the memory that will stay with me always.