

The Katrina Kids

By BL Meyer

As the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina rolls in, thoughts return again to those bleak days, watching people cling to their rooftops, waiting for a hand. Last September, at the one year mark, the magazines, newspapers, television reports, Web sites, and blogs weighed in, mostly to talk about how little stood fixed, how few received help, how most were discouraged and so many felt ashamed.

Anniversary—the word itself implies a marking of something important. Marking milestones, celebrating small victories, and sharing stories when things work out is a big part of life for those of us who work to support and connect families of children with disabilities. Such stories are not often told. Two years into the tragedy and aftermath of Katrina is, indeed, good time to tell a Katrina story about something that did get fixed.

Like most people, we at ExoMotion, a company that specializes in equipment for seating, mobility, and sleeping for those with special needs, were motivated to do something, but within just days of the storm, it was clear that indirect help was having little effect. Wherever our goodwill landed, it had to be direct and hands-on. In our office, stocked with pediatric mobility equipment, it dawned on us that the evac-

The finishing touch,
adjusting the hip belt.



uees boarding buses bound for Houston were people who could walk. But what about those who couldn't? What about the children who left New Orleans or Biloxi without their wheelchairs?

First, we contacted the few customers from the hurricane zone who could be reached directly, asking if their children needed mobility equipment. The answer was an overwhelming, yes! We knew we had to expand this to reach more families,

more kids. We called United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) in Houston and left a message asking if staff from UCP had assessed the situation in the Astrodome. Within six hours we received a call from UCP, and what we needed to do was no longer a question.

Well into the evening in Houston, the therapists from UCP returned from walking the Astrodome. They identified a number of children with mobility equipment needs.

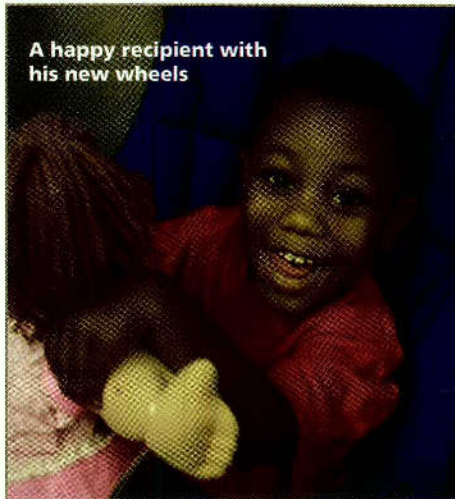
continued on page 48

continued from page 46

Reports from the media told of help pouring into the storm zone, but no one had a fix on where any of it was landing. Sending mobility systems that might be placed in a closet and never distributed was just not an acceptable, much less affordable, solution.

The challenges to charity were many. How could we transport the equipment to the storm zone with assurance it would be put to use? How could we identify the children whom the equipment would benefit the most? How could we assure a proper fit without the benefit of a prior seating evaluation? How could we enlist the help of others? There just wasn't enough time. Every evacuee was struggling with chaos, and you compound this tenfold for parents of children with disabilities. Hard to imagine!

Quick, direct delivery of this equipment required a team capable of visualizing the goal—a child in a wheelchair with their mobility restored. Getting bogged down in



A happy recipient with his new wheels

too many details would accomplish nothing. Allowing the enormity of the task to overwhelm us was not an option. So here's how it went; here were our marching orders: Get your friends to make phone calls asking others for small donations to help fund the transportation expenses. Rent a big truck. Load it up with pediatric wheelchairs and drive 2100 miles. Off-load in Houston, Baton Rouge, and Shreveport. In each city, meet with the families, fit the child, make any custom adjust-

ments on the fly, move to the next location.

And it worked. Our truck arrived in Houston within days of the next hurricane, Rita. At each stop, the children slated to receive a chair were ready and waiting. The person delivering and adjusting the wheelchairs had spent several years doing volunteer work in the developing world. Fitting a child in a wheelchair in a remote Afghan village, working with whatever you have on hand, was completely familiar to him. Doing this in an American city was not something he ever envisioned.

While the big agencies became hopelessly entangled in red tape, small groups mobilized and fixed a few small problems. Some might view this story as a proverbial drop in the bucket, but to a child needing wheels, it meant the world. Nothing more needs to be said after seeing their smiles except this: Happy Anniversary, Katrina Kids! •

BL Meyer is Vice President of ExoMotion.



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