



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“As we’ve been watching the human disaster of the hurricane unfold before our eyes, it’s becoming clear that the real essentials of life are food, water, and information. People in the middle of catastrophe need answers: Where are my children?...How do I get my money from a bank when its electronic network doesn’t work?...How can I get my life back?”

-Marylaine Block, “Ex Libris” at marylaine.com

After wondering whether books and information were being made available to all those affected by the recent hurricane, I recently received several emails that answered my question.

It turns out that the public libraries, the American Library Association (ALA), The Children’s Book Council (CBC), *Library Journal* and Houston Public Library – along with many other agencies – have lots of information on their websites. Louisiana State University (www.lsu.edu) also has a list of resources, including a link to the Librarians’ Index to the Internet (lii.org) which has a long list of resources related to the hurricane and its aftermath. The LSU site has an incredibly extensive list of links, including aerial photographs, librarian blogs, and NOLA.com, where there are photographs and stories from hurricane victims.

Marylaine Block, who writes what she calls “a weekly e-zine for librarians” gives a

great overview of the way that libraries have stepped in to help. She mentions the Houston Public Library and the Harris County Library, who are both supplying services and information, including library cards and free Internet connections. Shreve Public Library has been taking books to shelters and providing storytimes to children, as well as accepting donations for basic necessities. Ms. Block comments on the competent, caring and prompt help provided by libraries in all the affected areas and she makes a good point about the critical importance of public libraries, as they are able to adapt and serve their communities.

When I went to the Houston Public Library website I was overwhelmed by how quickly they have been able to set up programs, computers, hours of operation, a library of approximately 10,000 donated books, colorful furniture donated by Ikea, toys donated

by Target and 20 Internet computers – which can be used for filling out FEMA applications. All of this is at the George R. Brown Convention Center Shelter, “on the 3rd Floor, Ballroom A.”

It is difficult not to reflect on the power and immediacy of this kind of disaster and the action that it invites. I am particularly happy to see organizations like libraries and the International Reading Association (www.reading.org), First Book (www.firstbook.org) and the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (scbwi.org) on the many lists because I know they will do a good job in making sure that people and books and information are brought together. But I am also glad to see them because it is situations like these that highlight those organizations who have been certainly and effectively carrying out their missions – and

rarely making it to the front page of the newspaper.

The members of the International Reading Association are dedicated to promoting high levels of literacy for all and they are focusing the funds received on the needs of children and schools in the disaster area. First Book hopes to contribute a million books to the children in these areas, and SCBWI is assembling “Comfort Kits” for displaced children. Each kit will include 2 books, a flashlight, a toothbrush and toothpaste set, and a new toy or stuffed animal.

And the last words on the SCBWI Katrina Relief page sum up beautifully what all of these organizations are accomplishing: “Thank you for your kindness and generosity. Together we can make an amazing difference in the lives of these children.”