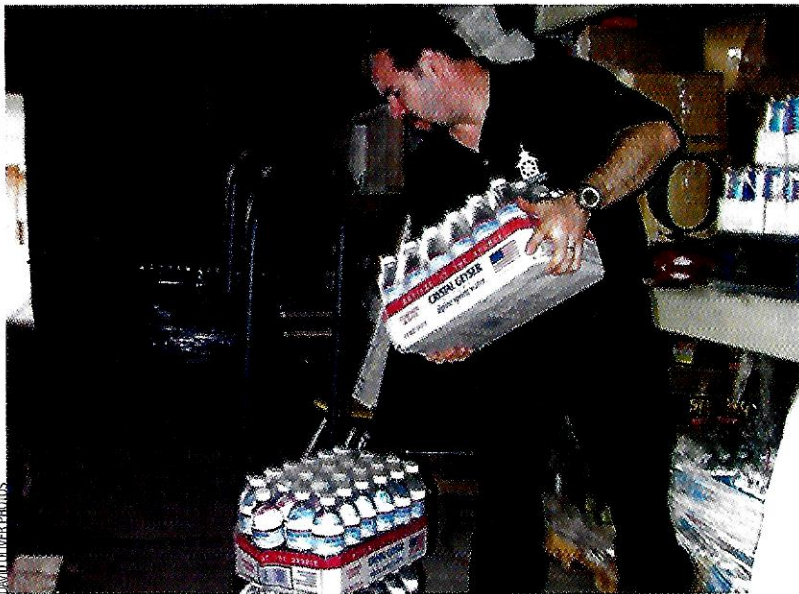
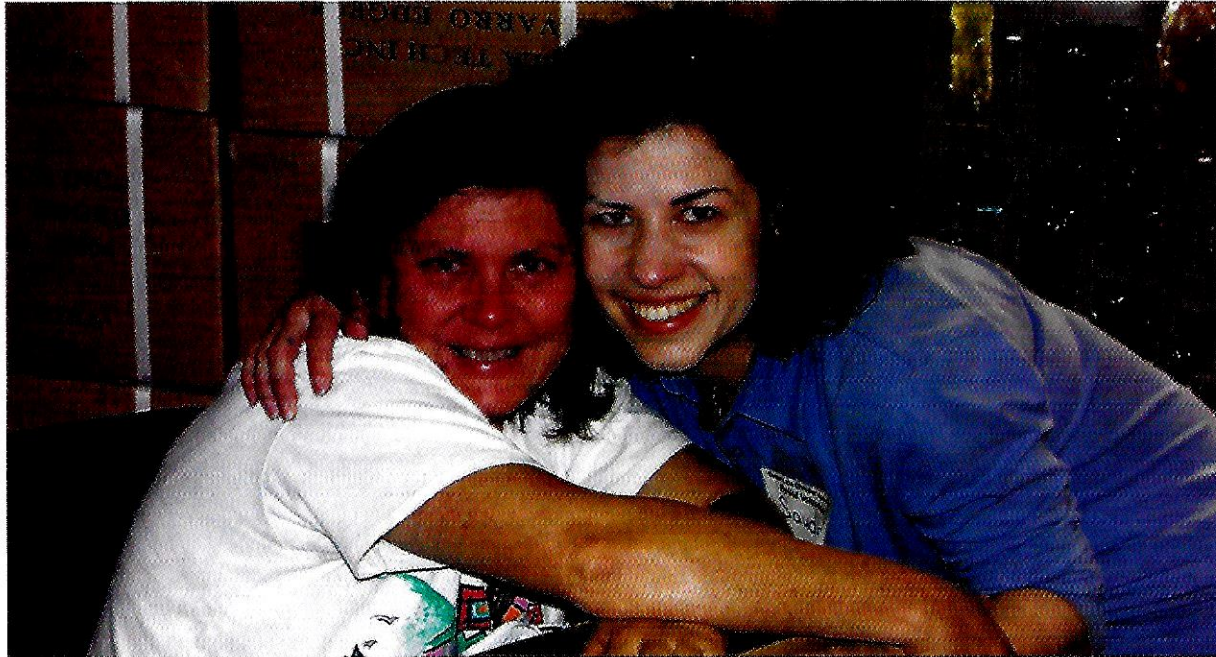


A Change in Priorities

Mississippi Dive Store Owner Spearheads Katrina Relief Efforts



DAVID OLIVER PHOTO

BY SCOTT D. JONES

For Billy Wise and his staff at Club Caribbean Diver and Travel in D'Iberville, Mississippi, the approaching storm known as Hurricane Katrina was cause for concern, but not cause for alarm. After all, Wise and

his staff of 16 have been weathering storms in the Gulf of Mexico for many years. However, on the morning of August 29 that all changed.

Coming ashore as a Category 5 Hurricane, Katrina caused devastation and changed

lives for virtually everyone on the Gulf Coast of the United States. More than 1,300 people in the region have lost their lives and more than 6,000 are still missing. Damage estimates are more than \$75 billion. Every resident of the region was affected either directly or indirectly by this massive natural disaster. Even now, months later, things are hardly back to normal and won't be for some time.

"We had no idea what was coming," recalls Wise, a PADI Course Director and DAN Business Member. "Storms have come and gone in the past, but this one changed everything." Hours before the storm came ashore, despite having to deal with a painful personal medical condition, Wise evacuated his family, relatives, friends and others to his second home in Destin, Fla. For the first few days, that home served as a refuge and shelter. With communications and the power out, all they could do was wait until conditions allowed them to head back.

That happened a few days later as Wise and his wife, Saudhi, returned and found a scene that will be hard to forget. "I grew up here, and places that I've known all my life are now just gone," he says.

Saudhi recalls, "It was overwhelming. Some places looked like a third-world country. People can't always tell the magnitude of this disaster from their televisions."

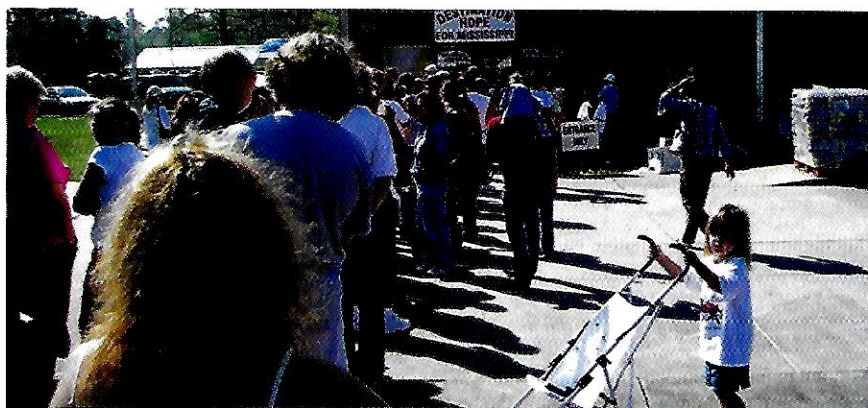
The storm and resulting flooding had completely destroyed entire neighborhoods. Of Club Caribbean Divers' 16 staff instructors, 10 had been left homeless. Some had been forced to use small boats to evacuate rising waters, others clung to trees until help arrived.

As the waters receded and it was possible to inspect the damage, Billy and Saudhi found their home incredibly had just received minor water damage. The store, on the other hand, had lost nearly half of its stock as the result of 1-2 feet of storm water. Pre-storm preparations were effective in saving much of the hard goods and equipment, but the training materials and paperwork were a total loss.

While the damage to the store and loss of stock could be easily fixed and replaced, it quickly became apparent to the Wises that diving was one of the last things on anyone's mind. A large portion of the town was still seeking shelter and life's basic necessities. Active participants in their local church (Cedar Lake Christian Assembly), both Billy and Saudhi volunteered to help. Knowing Wise's background as a business owner, the pastor of the church quickly put him in charge of the relief efforts.

If Wise thought he had his hands full running a busy dive store and travel center, it was nothing compared to what he would face in the two months following the storm. Instead of scheduling open water pool sessions or Instructor Examinations, Wise found himself scheduling daily deliveries of food, clothing and supplies from across the nation. The church became a "distribution center" serving thousands of displaced and residents in need, some from as far as 30 miles.

Daily semi-trailers jam-packed with supplies arrived with water, clothing, food and other items that were quickly put to use. Working around the clock for 45 straight days, more



than \$4 million worth of aid was distributed. Donations came in from across the country and even from as far away as Africa.

Both Billy and Saudhi agree there's no place that they would rather be. "Helping people certainly makes a difference. It's so easy to get depressed. People's hopes and dreams have been washed away, but being here helps make everyone feel like they are moving forward," said Saudhi.

She points out that everyone in the region needed help. "People here are proud and not used to asking for help. We tried to make it as comfortable as possible, but it's never easy in a situation like this."

For Billy, his time at the Distribution Center struck a personal chord. "It was emotionally draining. These weren't strangers coming in for help, but people that I've known since my childhood," Billy recalls. "This has shown all of us the good side of man and how generous and giving people can be."

Despite all of the devastation and tales of need, some stories of hope and encouragement manage to put a smile on everyone's face. Saudhi relates the story of a young, 9-year old boy who had lost his new shoes in the storm. He kept coming to the Center looking for new white shoes. A few weeks went by and a new pair of white shoes arrived for him—courtesy of some kind workers at Reebok headquarters who had taken a collection to buy the boy some shoes. Shortly thereafter, truckloads of shoes arrived from an organization in Chicago—enough to meet everyone's needs.

During the Christmas season, 35 pallettes of toys were delivered to the Center. After 500 families had come and selected toys, Billy

recalls the supplies never ran out. "It was amazing, but we had enough to take care of everyone's needs at Christmas and still have some left over!"

His former role as Course Director and Dive Stores Owner now on-hold indefinitely, Wise doesn't know when, or if, his store will ever open again. But, he's content with his continuing role providing assistance to those in need.

"Diving has been put on the back burner. Saudhi and I both feel that God has a place for everyone and this is where he had us when there was a need. He opened the door and it was our choice to serve. Nothing seems more important to us right now than being here."

The recovery efforts continue with some estimating full recovery is at least two years away. Both Billy and Saudhi made a point to say that this crisis is far from over. "There are still places that are dark at night because there's no power," Saudhi said. Her husband echoed her thought, "People seem to think that when the media leaves, everything is fixed and OK. That's not the case. The recovery period here is measured in years, not months."

For the near future both Billy and Saudhi are spending their days at Cedar Lake Disaster Relief Center. They are actively involved in telling people about the region's needs and encouraging people to get involved.

For more information, email billyw@ccdive.com or visit www.cedarlake.net



DAN Member Scott D. Jones is a dive journalist who has been diving and writing about it for nearly 20 years. He is the founder of DiveNewswire Networks, a global press release distribution organization serving the dive industry.

About The Author