

# Fire and Faith

## Texas Disaster Ignites Service

by Mary O. Parker

Smithville, with its deep Czech roots, is a tight-knit community located at the edge of the Lost Pines region of central Texas. There, I'd raised a family, led Cub Scouts, and once owned a bookstore. And there during a long, brutal September the second worst wildfire in U.S. history turned lives upside down.

Sparked by downed power lines and propelled by a perfect storm of drought, wind and heat, the Bastrop Complex Fires raged for 26 days. The blazes tore through dozens of rural neighborhoods and destroyed miles of rare loblolly pine ecosystem. The fire ultimately consumed 1,664 structures and 34,068 acres. The blaze came within four miles of the city limits, and nearly 40 of my friends lost homes.

Burnt towers meant days of no cell service and mounting anxiety. To stem the worry, residents combed the Smithville Recreation Center to seek information about friends and loved-ones. At the fire's peak, 500 evacuees and countless pets found refuge here.

I helped oversee the Smithville Distribution Center, a couple of blocks from the rec center. Evacuees, and later, those who'd lost everything, came for necessities. In a three-week period, our center served over 4,200 fire-affected folks. To put that into perspective, that's more than the entire population of Smithville.

As the weeks went by and the separate fires raged ever greater, eventually drawn toward one another, we residents too, drew together emotionally. At the same time, we also breathlessly raced from one dire need to the next.

With all that breathless racing, I didn't realize until later just how many "racers" belonged to Lions clubs. Once I connected the dots, the picture formed made this non-Lion's jaw drop. In a crisis heavy with volunteerism, Lion activity consistently outweighed it all.

My connect-the-dots drawing begins with Joe Franks, president of Giddings Lions Club. On Labor Day,

Franks headed to Paige, a tiny community at the fire's northeastern edge. There, he immediately spearheaded efforts to feed evacuees and firefighters. "We got to Paige on Monday. Red Cross got there on Thursday," Franks says.

Twenty miles away, Charley Baugh, Giddings Lions Club treasurer, checked out the scene back in Smithville, now four miles from the fire's southeastern edge, where he discovered 120 evacuees needing meals. Baugh recalls, "I'd just walked out of the rec center in Smithville and called Joe. He'd just walked out of the community center in Paige. We each had a frog in our throat, but we got it to-



Lisa Gonzales co-manages the Smithville Distribution Center.

Photos by Mary Parker



gether and went on. I told him, 'We need this and this,' and he said, 'Go. Get it.' He didn't question me."

Behind the scenes, Andy Rodriguez, Governor of District 2-S5 and a member of the Gonzales Noon Lions Club, worked at rounding up funding. Ultimately, he says, thanks to grants and generous club contributions, approximately \$25,000 went toward relief efforts. That figure includes \$10,000 from Lions Club International Foundation (LCIF).

Rodriguez says, "With LCIF 100 percent of your dollar goes into relief efforts, no administration costs. Well, I put in for the grant at 9:45 and by 10:43, 58 minutes later, it was approved. Now that's cutting out bureaucracy!"

Those of us volunteering at the Smithville Distribution Center came to appreciate that lack of bureaucracy. While donations poured in, no one knew exact needs until the moment arrived. To wit: by week two we had plenty of pillows—a shortage the first week—but folks desperate to sort through ashes and uncover what the fire had left behind lacked trash cans, gloves, rakes, shovels and hoses needed to do the job. For those who still had homes but

with smoke damage, we needed vinegar. So we made a wish list.

Now to my connect-the-dots picture add Amberley Palmer of the Smithville Noon Lions Club. Palmer asked us, "What do you need?" We gave her our list, not really believing she meant to go out and buy all that stuff. Who actually does that? Well, we soon found out: Lions, that's who. And not just once. Not twice. Every single day for nearly three weeks, Palmer posed her question and Lions delivered.

Palmer's involvement began with a call to Rodriguez, who told her to check in with Joe Franks. "When I talked to Joe, he said, 'Go buy what you need. It doesn't matter how much you spend, just let me know if it goes over \$500. Do you understand?' I said, 'Yes,' not really understanding." She laughs, remembering. "I think he asked me that three or four times in the course of our short conversation. I had to get a check from Charley [Baugh] and even though we'd never even met before, Charley just handed me a blank check."

Franks explains, "I think 'faith' is a good word here." With faith in Rodriguez, who assured him the district



Among the Lions who led relief efforts were (front from left) Lisa Gonzales and Amberley Palmer and (back from left) Meredith and Joe Franks, Andy and Cindy Rodriguez, and Charley Baugh.





Amberley Palmer (left) and Lisa Gonzales secured necessities for fire victims.

would reimburse the club, he says, “I was telling [Baugh and Palmer] to spend money and I didn’t have the money to spend.”

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On Sept. 6, just two days after sparks ignited, the Texas Lions Foundation awarded the Giddings Lions Club \$2,000, thanks, in part, to efforts of Charles Villeneuve, a 2 S5 past district governor.

“But that went really quickly,” states Baugh, who ultimately wrote 24 fire-related checks totaling nearly \$9,000. “We were the front lines.” Items purchased included mattresses, eyeglasses, food, cleaning supplies, school supplies and, of course, those items on our lists.

Lisa Gonzales of the Smithville Noon Lions accompanied Palmer as she shopped with our first list. Before I knew she belonged to Lions, I’d seen Gonzales, an insurance agent with fire-related claims tripling her workload, come in regularly collecting necessities for dazed clients.

“Some just couldn’t do it, so I’d do it for them,” she shrugs. When the City of Smithville insisted center volunteers take a Sunday off, Gonzales co-managed the center for a day so the doors would remain open.

Week two, volunteer Meredith Franks joined us, her spunky personality engendering easy rapport. After connecting with a woman who talked of returning to work but having lost her make-up to fire, Franks showed up the next day with a basket full of make-up. Another day, a set of cookware came with her but left “with a woman who likes to cook and who’d lost everything,” says Franks.

Chatting one day, I shared my amazement at how the Lions kept fulfilling our wish lists. Franks’ response? “Oh, yeah, I know. I’m a Lion.” She’d been in on it from day one! In fact, she’s not only president of the Giddings New Horizons Lions Club but also Joe Franks’ wife.

After I’d worked days with Cherrie Pullium, a key player in the Smithville Distribution Center, I discovered she’s not only a Lion but also Leo adviser for the Smithville club. Pullium housed evacuees, solicited donations, organized warehouses and assisted fire victims. “I did what needed to be done,” she states, simply.

Ironically, the last Lion I uncovered I had “raced” with the most. Sheila Tamble of the Smithville Noon Lions coordinated all aspects of Smithville’s fire-related efforts including working with FEMA. Not only that, but Tamble’s Facebook post suggesting they create a distribution center lured Pullium to Main Street at 4 a.m. on Sept. 5 to get the whole thing started.

I suspect, as the smoke continues dissipating, I’ll discover more Lions who “raced” beside me during those crazy times since it’s clear to me now that when disaster strikes, Lions do, too. What’s also clear is how many parts they play. As Joe Franks notes, “Our role changed over time from relief to taking food and medicine to taking trash cans.”

What doesn’t change, stresses DG Rodriguez, whom I met when he delivered a load of those trash cans, is the role Lions can and should play in situations like the Bastrop Complex Fires. “We found out where we fit through this. It’s in that short-period time between when disaster strikes and when the long-term recovery organizations like Salvation Army and Red Cross come in.”

Or as my connect-the-dots would read if it formed words: “A Lion helps those in need and helps them right now.”