

Katrina Evacuees Thankful for San Diegan's Generosity; More Evacuees May Be on the Way

By WILL CARLESS

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Kenn Carter, one of 82 Hurricane Katrina evacuees to arrive in San Diego on Sunday, said he was one of the lucky ones who managed to get out of New Orleans.

He owns a car and had enough cash to buy gas to escape the rising floodwaters in his home neighborhood of St. Bernard in north-east New Orleans. So on Tuesday, Carter said he packed a few possessions and then got onto the freeway and headed towards Baton Rouge.

The roads were so packed, however, that he decided to turn off the main interstate and he headed toward Baker, La. That drive should have taken him an hour. Instead he was on the road, crawling in traffic, for close to four hours.

Eventually, by asking passers-by, Carter tracked down a shelter in Baker that was providing aid to evacuees from New Orleans. Carter holed up at the shelter for a couple of days, his allocated space shrinking by the hour as more and more evacuees arrived.

That's when San Diego businessman David Perez walked in.

"A gentleman came in and offered to anyone who wanted to leave (the chance to) come to San Diego," said Carter in a voice puffed up with admiration. "I was one of the first ones up."

Carter, who has never been to San Diego before, said that Perez walked into the shelter, made a speech and prayed with all the families there.

"He went down the aisle and gave every family \$100 out of his pocket," he said.

The 82 evacuees boarded a plane chartered by Perez and flew to San Diego Sunday afternoon. Upon arrival, they were ushered onto buses and driven to Kearny High School, where the Red Cross had organized a shelter with dozens of beds, supplies and showers.

Red Cross spokeswoman Gayle Falkenthal said Monday that the evacuees only stayed in the shelter for one night. On Monday they were moved into local hotel rooms also paid for by Mr. Perez, she said.

Falkenthal said that among the people brought to San Diego, at least 16 were children under 18. She said most of the families housed at the shelter were in fairly high spirits and were just relieved to get off the plane.

She said that the aim of the Red Cross was to ensure that the evacuees' immediate needs were met as they arrived in San Diego. This meant ensuring they had a roof over their heads, had food to eat and water to drink and were receiving whatever physical and mental health treatment they might need.

As offers of help, food and supplies poured into the school Monday, Falkenthal said that monetary donations are all the Red Cross can accept.

"Even a small monetary donation makes a difference," she said, adding that a good idea for potential donors is to hold a garage sale and to donate the proceeds to the Red Cross.

The Red Cross is prepared to take on up to 600 additional evacuees, said Falkenthal. At press time, Red Cross workers were waiting to hear from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which will be contacting them if more evacuees will be heading to San Diego.

If a large number of people were to be sent here, they would be initially housed and processed at San Diego State University, said Falkenthal.

Please contact Will Carless directly at will.carless@voiceofsandiego.org with your thoughts, ideas, personal stories or tips.