

The Next Step: Finding Jobs, Homes, Food for Katrina Evacuees

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Remeika and Alex Daniels stepped onto the powdery sand of Ocean Beach as if they were stepping onto the shores of a new land. Looking out at the surfers and the spray and the pier, Alex Daniels let out a long sigh.

"Oh man, it's beautiful," he said. "I need this to get this hurricane out of my mind."

The sea breezes may have sufficed to blow the Daniels' worries away, at least for a little while, but for evacuees like them, displaced and brought to San Diego on little more than a whim and a prayer, questions arise. Where to find a job? How to contact the authorities and apply for aid? How to pay for the next meal?



Photo credit: Will Carless

Danell Perry, a 19-year-old Hurricane Katrina evacuee who boarded a plane chartered by San Diego businessman David Perez, uses the Federal Emergency Management Agency help desk on Monday.

The Daniels and some 27 other families like them came to California courtesy of San Diego businessman David Perez, who has spent the last 10 days funding and organizing flights to and from the area decimated by Hurricane Katrina.

Remeika Daniels fled the hurricane on her honeymoon. On Saturday, Aug. 27, she married Alex's brother, Danny. The next day, the couple woke to find the skies had turned black. The hurricane was closing in. They fled, without going home, leaving everything behind, including Remeika's wedding gown.

Less than two weeks later, the Daniels find themselves in San Diego at the cusp of a new life. Barely able to come to terms with losing everything they know and love, they have also found themselves wholly dependant on the kindness of strangers.

One stranger in particular.

On Monday, in the lobby of the Holiday Inn On The Bay, overlooking the tall ships and military vessels of the harbor, David Perez was a name that had taken on almost mythical status. On the lobby couches and in the adjoining restaurant, tidbits of information were traded like betting tips between the evacuees. Rumors flew around the hotel: Perez will make an appearance at 4 p.m., 5 p.m., maybe 7 p.m. Perez has

arranged for jobs for everyone. Perez is going to be handing out cash.

For the Daniels, any appearance of Perez was far more than an amusement; it was a necessity. They hadn't eaten since breakfast. The family had loaded onto a plane in Baker, La., with promises of shelter, jobs, housing and food, all provided by Mr. Perez. When they arrived in San Diego at 2 a.m. on Monday morning, they found a lack of information and very little in the way of support. They woke to find a message on their room's voicemail. Mr. Perez would be meeting them at 4 p.m.

On Monday morning, taking her first look at San Diego during a drive around town with a *Voice* reporter, a few things laid heavy on Rameika Daniels' mind: Was this Perez guy trustworthy? Could his word be taken as legitimate? How would she support herself in a city where the average rent is three times that of her home town?

Back at the hotel, at 4:30 p.m., Danny Daniels was beginning to grow impatient. A crowd of evacuees had formed in the hotel lobby in anticipation of Perez's appearance, but despite the buzz, Daniels remained skeptical. Looking across at another group of evacuees, who Perez flew in on Sept. 3 and have been staying in San Diego hotels ever since, he wondered out loud why they haven't yet been given jobs, how they are buying themselves food. Top on his list, he said, is more permanent shelter for himself and his new wife.

"I'm not worried about a job right now. I'm worried about housing, somewhere to lay my head," he said. "I didn't leave from closer to my home to come this far to another shelter."

Just where the Daniels and families like them will be housed long-term is one of the hot questions currently surrounding the evacuees. A few miles away from the Holiday Inn, at a Red Cross processing center set up over the weekend in Mission Valley, lines of evacuees had already formed looking for apartments, jobs and some money to tide them over.

Nineteen-year-old Danell Perry sat at a folding table discussing her situation with a Red Cross case worker. She explained that she had come to San Diego with 14 other family members, possibly in search of a new life, but initially just to escape the nightmare of Louisiana.

Perry, who was flown to town by a flight organized by Perez last week, said her family also looked at the option of flying to Miami before settling on San Diego as a good option. Marveling at how well-organized and efficient the Red Cross center was, she expressed optimistic hopes for the future.

"Right now," she said. "I'm planning to stay and find work, housing, get myself situated financially. Anything else, I'll decide afterward."

Joe Bonanno, the case worker helping Perry to achieve those goals, explained the various ways in which the Red Cross can aid evacuees to get themselves on their feet. He said the aim of the organization is to get people back to a similar position they were in before disaster struck.

"Their credo is 'Get you back to where you were,'" said Bonanno. "In other words, if you were living in a Waldorf-Astoria, we try to get you back to living in a Waldorf-Astoria."

Asked about Perez and his motives, Bonanno said he trusts that Perez has nothing but good intentions in bringing people to San Diego. He said the businessman had doubtless done a great thing in bringing people to safety and putting smiles on their faces. However, he stressed that Perez has only scratched the surface in terms of what needs to be done to put these people's lives back together.

"In the long range, he's dumping them -- he's giving it to the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the long-term people," he said. "But he did get it started. I think he doesn't realize the enormity of the situation."

Other Red Cross workers who asked not to be named expressed some cynicism about Perez's motives. Some mentioned the marketing value of what he has done, stressing the fact that few people knew who David Perez was 10 days ago. Some aid workers had researched Perez's background to try and find out who he is and why he has stepped up to the plate as a philanthropist in such a spectacular way.

Back at the Holiday Inn, Perez arrived at 4:45 p.m. The enigmatic, dapper businessman was all smiles, and greeted many of the evacuees personally, slapping hands here, kissing babies there. One young man asked about the possibility of a job and Perez spent five minutes on his cell phone before setting the evacuee up with a job at one of his warehouses.

Perez said his foundation will be giving all 28 families some spending money and will be working to get the families started on the road to recovery.

"Our goal is to have them in their homes and get them jobs and cars," he said. "We have hundreds of people who have opened their homes, hundreds of people that have donated cars, hundreds of people that want to give these guys jobs."

The Daniels stuck to the sidelines, watching this stranger with a mixture of awe, suspicion and hope. Perez spread his hands to the crowd and began to console, to joke and to offer inspiration. He was accompanied by a preacher and representatives of a number of charities and organizations, who he said would put evacuees in touch with families who could offer them homes. Most importantly for the Daniels, he said he would be giving each family \$1,000 in cash this morning.

When the crowd erupted spontaneously into applause, the Daniels joined in vigorously. Whatever Perez may be -- some say a blessing, some say a misguided hero -- he is still the best hope they have.

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