

## Extreme Makeover – Diakonos Retreat Style

Over the past couple of weeks, Mike Holland, FCPO and past Diakonos director, Deborah and I headed for southern Mississippi at the request of members from the Gulfport Police Department through the Fellowship of Christian Peace Officers. With the support of the Diakonos Retreat Society, Sunwest Christian Fellowship, Comox Pentecostal Church, The Driving Force (they gave us a van free) and the Calgary Police Service we were able to finance this trip.

We had prepared ourselves for the visuals that would be there by going onto a website prepared by one of Gulfport's finest. One can only prepare oneself so much. The reality was beyond what words on this page can describe. You must experience it first hand to understand the overwhelming (a significantly lacking word) nature of this disaster and what it meant to the Peace Officers, Firefighters and paramedics (and their wives and children) who had to serve and survive themselves in one of America's worst natural disasters.

Contact had been made and approval granted with and through Lt. Leonard Papania of Gulfport Police. He greeted us and then took us for a tour of the City of Gulfport. He went to the eastern edge of Gulfport and drove to the western edge along the presently unusable to the public highway 90. It did not take long for the three of us to have our senses filled beyond their capacities by the sights, lack of sounds, smells and emotions as we observed miles of absolute destruction. For a distance of **about three to four blocks deep and over one hundred miles long**, anything and everything that was standing was absolutely demolished with few exceptions. Houses, apartment buildings, hotels, business and large barge like casinos were destroyed. The Port of Gulfport had hundreds of shipping containers blown or swept away by waves and water for a mile and a half northwest from their original location. These containers were blown into remaining houses destroying even more homes. One of the major Casino barges in the area was literally separated from the mother barge and tossed up onto the shore covering highway 90 making it impassable.

How did this affect the police, fire and paramedics? The police service building was unusable, completely flooded. A Fire Hall was completely destroyed along with equipment and ambulances. Many firefighters and paramedics lost their homes, their work and equipment in one event. The police service had 40 officers who were either displaced from their homes from flooding and/or wind damage or their homes were completely destroyed. Mike, Deb and I met several personally whose homes were destroyed and all the possessions gone. They were unable to salvage anything. One of the officers we met, Greg, had no uniforms left and because of his size.....6'9"...had little to wear for work. Many other officers, ninety, I believe, suffered damaged to their homes as well. The difficulty at this point is who will be covered by insurance and who will not. Some had flood insurance and will be covered. Others did not because they did not live a flood area but because of a twenty-two foot surge of sea water pouring into bays and bayou's hundreds of homes that have not flooded since Gulfport's existence

found themselves under water. These officers and members are going to be facing an uphill battle personally and with the insurance companies.

After our tour with Lt. Papania was complete, we began to explore what our roles would be while in Gulfport. Our prayers had been for divine appointments. It didn't take long for us to learn that Lt. Papania was one of those who had suffered from flooding, had no flood insurance and because of the work demands in his role as logistic coordinator for this disaster, had not had any time to go to his home and take out furniture, carpets etc, that needed to be removed. His house was flooded to the four foot level at the back and a foot and a half throughout the front of the house. Therefore, virtually all his furniture was destroyed either by the water, the time that past or mold. As we began talking with others it was very evident that Lt. Len had been looking after everyone else's needs, making sure everyone got relocated or supplies were provided but his own were left unmet. The Papania home became our first divine appointment.

First was yard clean-up. So many trees had been blown down in the back that it was far beyond our ability to do without a team of loggers. (They showed up later...a team of seven guys from Wake Forest PD in North Carolina, trailer and chainsaws in hand). We cleaned up the front yard of all the debris and planned for the daunting task of emptying the house of all the furniture and any wet or molded carpets, clothes or toys. Three days later we were done. Virtually every piece of furniture, all the kids beds except the boys metal framed bunk, all the living room, dining room, master bedroom and office furniture was thrown out, ruined by the water and mold. We were sick and tried to salvage what we could. Most clothing was salvaged, some toys and good china etc. Mold had taken hold in every room throughout the walls and ceilings. In the end, Len and his wife Angela are hoping that they can bulldoze the house and start again.

Our second job was to assist an officer and his wife to pack up their belongings and move them to storage so their house could be repaired. Several sections of the roof had literally been blown off and a lot of possessions were covered in wet, blown insulation. This was much easier on us emotionally as most things could be saved but it will be some time before they can get back into the house.

From salvager and movers, we then became plumbers. Due to the huge number of homes that had been destroyed, rental and purchase property is at a premium. One of the officers had three homes, one being his recently deceased parents. This house was partially renovated but needed the plumbing completed in the kitchen and all the bathrooms. Mike and I took to that and Deb cleaned up most of the rooms. This house was to be rented to another officer and his family who lost their house entirely. WE felt good about knowing we helped two officers and their families even though we did not meet the family moving in.

Our final divine appointment and act of service was to the Papania seniors, Len's Papania's parents. They live next to Lt. Papania and also suffered some flood damage but more, they suffered significant destruction to their yard. The Papania Seniors were feeling very daunted by the task at hand due to their age and inability to recover as well.

They had also experienced Hurricane Camille many years ago and knew how difficult rebuilding would be. Numerous trees, branches were shattered and fell into the yard destroying much of the beautiful garden work they had done. They were gracious to us and opened their home to us for sleeping accommodations (air conditioned, I might add). All three of us worked very hard for two days to clean up their yard from trees, becoming loggers and hauling branches and trees out to the front road where it was being picked up by big front end loaders and hauled away by the truckload. I have never sweat so much or been so hot in many, many years. Deborah, Mike and I are walking advertisements for PowerAde. It was a great thirst quencher. The Papania's were very grateful for the work we did and were we equally blessed by their hospitality. We left Gulfport with some great friends who we hope to see again soon.

Which brings me to my next point - Extreme Makeover – Diakonos Retreat Style. The task of rebuilding the Gulf region is very overwhelming. As the saying goes, “How do you eat an elephant.....one bite at a time”. As a group of people, I believe that the FCPO and Diakonos Retreat family can make a stab at helping to eat the elephant.

As I mentioned, Len Papania will not likely be covered for the flood damage but will receive some funding through insurance, FEMA and some other resources. It is my hope however that we will be able to send a team of 10 people down to Gulfport to assist Len and Angela Papania in the rebuilding process. This will require funding and people with some building skills including plumbing, electrical, dry walling and possibly framing, to help rebuild the house. We don't know at this time what the timing will be for this rebuild but I will be in touch with Lt. Papania on a regular basis to determine what the best possible scenario is. Therefore, if you are interested in helping to fund this project or to assist in rebuilding, please contact myself through [www.diakonosretreat.com](http://www.diakonosretreat.com) or email at [programs@diakonosretreat.com](mailto:programs@diakonosretreat.com) to discuss this very exciting possibility. WE can't do it all but we can make a difference in at least one family and perhaps others based on the response. Consider this a divine invitation to a divine appointment. God bless you and I hope to hear from some of you soon.