

# redLife

Jennifer Wilson was just a high school sophomore when she discovered that one of her missions in life would be to provide disaster relief. At that time, her family had received aid from the Red Cross when a creek overflow flooded their home in San Diego County.

"I was so impressed with how they helped my family that I joined the Red Cross six years later as a Disaster Action Team member. I wanted to do the same thing for other people," explained Wilson, a Zynx Health regional sales manager.

She also trained with the California Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT), a civilian branch of FEMA's National Disaster Medical System division. On August 28, she seized the opportunity to serve Katrina victims as a telecommunications specialist when she received 12 hours' notice for optional deployment to Biloxi, Miss.

Wilson had served on two previous non-emergency deployments to Ukraine, with DMAT and the California National Guard. But the Biloxi call to duty was her first experience with emerging devastation. Her flight to Memphis was followed by a nine-hour drive to Camp Shelby, Miss., before she finally arrived at Biloxi High School. This \$10 million structure built from casino revenue was serving as a makeshift clinic, pharmacy and emergency operations center. It would be her workplace and home for the next two weeks.

More than a thousand evacuees had made their way through floodwaters and hurricane debris to the shelter; soon, Wilson's 35-person team was treating 200 to 300 patients a day.

Working 15-hour days, Wilson used a special radio and satellite phone to connect with Navy ships to arrange the transportation of personnel, as well as the delivery of medicine, food and water. Working conditions included only cold non-potable water inside, and military protection with sub-machine guns outside.

"Despite all my training, I was not prepared for the emotional impact of how quickly entire homes, neighborhoods and cities can be wiped away," Wilson reflected.

Nonetheless, her team enjoyed moments of lightheartedness: One local couple was married at the site, accompanied by harmonica music and concluding with a ride in a golf cart with tin cans strung to the back. The bride carried a bouquet that Wilson constructed from colorful tissue paper found in the arts and crafts department.

"Nothing can equal the feeling of a heartfelt thank-you from someone in need," said Wilson. "Being able to help and share the struggle with the people hit by Katrina will stay with me forever."

**Zynx Health**

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photograph by Lisa Krantz, San Antonio Express-News