

**Testimony before House Education and Labor Committee
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities
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Actor and Volunteer

Over the years I have volunteered for a variety of things through my church; working with teens as a youth leader for 6 years; doing "short-term missions" work; and even spending 10 days working with children in Cochabamba, Bolivia. I've also given a great deal of time to various charities over the years to help raise funds. But perhaps my most profound volunteer experience was during a recent trip to Biloxi, MS. As part of Guiding Light's 70th anniversary, our entire cast and crew made the journey from New York in January to work alongside volunteers at Hands On Gulf Coast.

Hands On Gulf Coast has been housing volunteers since September 2005 as part of a disaster relief project of Hands On Network. More than 5,000 volunteers have gutted homes, installed playgrounds, refurbished schools, and touched lives. Their work has been critical to the recovery efforts and they have been recognized as the premier provider of volunteer labor for the area.

For a week, we were just like thousands of other individuals who came through the doors of Hands On – eager to invest some sweat equity to help our fellow Americans in a time of critical need. Upon first sight, the scale of the damage was incomparable, but the magnitude of the desire that the Hands On longer term volunteers displayed was profound and inspiring. Many young people had walked away from college, their families, and their lives to be a part of the recovery. Sacrificing daily comforts to aid a region still healing from Hurricane Katrina. They spoke of their willingness to help as more than just volunteering. This was their civic duty. One young volunteer, Luc Lamarache, said to me, "I just can't imagine anything else I could be doing right now that would be this important."

Like many people, the Guiding Light team was anxious about what they were getting into by volunteering for this experience. They posed common questions about how they would fit in, get involved, and make a meaningful contribution. We didn't really have construction experience, yet here we were to work on reconstructing homes for

Biloxi residents. Our fears were allayed almost immediately after arriving on site. We were divided into smaller groups and placed in the hands of capable Volunteer Leaders who showed us what to do lending a helping hand when needed. Within a very short time, we were well taught, empowered, equipped and ready to engage.

I personally spoke with many residents, young and old. It quickly became clear to me that without Hands On and other disaster relief organizations to fill the void there is little hope. That fact crystallized for me as I spoke with an elderly resident in Biloxi called Gerda. In her young life she had fled Europe because of the oppression of the Nazi's and made her home in East Biloxi. In the months following Hurricane Katrina, she came to believe in her heart that God had forgotten her. Stuck in her FEMA trailer with scarce resources to start rebuilding on her own, she had lost hope. Since volunteers from Hands On reached out to her she has been overwhelmed by the tremendous outpouring of support. Her "angels," as she affectionately calls them, spend hours every day repairing her home. Guiding Light played a part in rebuilding her home. I personally worked in her home with my group. Over the course of our week there, we insulated and sheetrocked the entire house. Later this month she will be moving back into her home – something that we are so proud to have been a part of – restoring hope by renewing a sense of a future where life can still get better.

When the Valentine's Day episode of Guiding Light aired across the country telling people the story of our week in Biloxi, we touched people everywhere by shedding light on the immense need that continues in the Gulf Coast. To our fans, we demonstrated how volunteering was not something for the young, for the skilled, or the experienced – it was something that we could all be a part of. We helped people to overcome their fears. Over and over again I've been told by people who saw the show "hey, I can do that!" Volunteering became real to our audience and the overwhelming response since then has been proof that when people understand how much of a difference they can make, they are compelled to join.

Every month during 2007, Guiding Light will continue to work with Hands On Network affiliates inviting fans to serve alongside us on a variety of different projects. We have a growing waiting list of thousands of people who now want to share in the volunteer experience they witnessed. Hands On helped to show our fans that if a group as diverse as our cast could make it work, then there is a place for everyone to get involved.

Volunteer service has never had a more important role in our society. We are at a time in this country when people are craving some kind of stability in a world that is increasingly spinning out of control. People want to make a difference, but many of the world's problems, from the war in Iraq to the aftermath of Katrina seem so colossal that many wonder if there is anything at all they can do that will actually have an impact. People want to do something, somewhere that will give them even the smallest sense that they have made a difference. But where and how?

What I have experienced in working with Hands On is that they are making volunteering more accessible than ever – creating entry points and facilitating opportunities to engage in an experience that can utilize anyone's talents. When volunteering becomes a common experience across the nation, there is a profound transformation that takes place, not only in the act of giving, but in transforming the volunteer. That unique shared experience is key.

That's what volunteering needs to become, an automated response, not only to disasters on the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina, but in every day life. Hands On has become a vital conduit for change in communities across the country, giving ordinary citizens profound and new opportunities to serve. In Biloxi we felt the pulse of the community, and witnessed the difference that we made. What is particularly encouraging with Hands On Network is that we can continue to serve in cities around the country.

My family will be returning to Biloxi in June to continue to support the rebuilding efforts. My wife along with my teenage son and daughter watched the Biloxi episode with me. They said, "Hey, I can do that!" and are now compelled to return with me – proof that volunteering can become second nature, a responsibility of all our fellow citizens to meet the needs in our communities.

In the early radio days of Guiding Light, the show began with the following poem by Edwin Markham, read by the character of Reverend Rutledge. We have now, once again, added this poem to the opening of our show. We feel it is as relevant today as it was then.

**There is a destiny that makes us brothers.
None goes his way alone.
All that we send into the lives of others
Comes back into our own.**