

Proud to be a Coloradan

*By Sheila Johnson*

On the eve of the fateful landfall of Hurricane Katrina on US soil, I literally received a wakeup call at 10:30 pm from my dear friend who I, along with her family and close friends, have affectionately nicknamed Reverend Yo. For five days, beginning on August 23, 2005, as our nation and much of the world held their breath, faith leaders, community organizers, and multi-level government officials tried to predict *if* and *when* this massive storm would make her uninvited, unwelcomed, and unprecedented (at the time) arrival. She began as a mild tidal wave, grew into a tropical storm, and landed as a Category Five hurricane on August 28, 2005 bringing with her death, destruction, and embarrassment.

Reverend Yo asked me to join her along with other local pastors and volunteers for a few hours of disaster training in preparation of providing long-term recovery assistance to survivors of Hurricane Katrina. Members of the amazing Red Cross organization facilitated the training. We learned that a private benefactor had purchased all of the land and living quarters that encompassed that part of Aurora known as Lowry Air Force base. He did not hesitate, when asked, to open the doors of every standing building, making them clean and pristine for our new citizens and incurring all costs associated with this humanitarian housing effort.

Hundreds of volunteers patiently waited their turn in the long security check lines hoping and praying to pass the federal background inspections. Many came. Some were physically challenged, but they came. Some could not speak English, but they came. Some were carrying crying babies and blankets for the newcomers, and they came. Most were shedding tears of compassion and wanting to do whatever it took to bring comfort and safety to a displaced people. They came.

We all listened and learned about the cultural differences and dialect of our Louisianan soon-to-be citizens. We talked about fear of the unknown, and the trauma of losing everything and everybody. We talked about putting love into action.

Over the next twenty-four months I observed my friend, Reverend Yo do unthinkable acts of kindness in an effort to defeat the hopelessness of a collectively broken people. She drove through all parts of Denver and the Front Range (at all hours) transporting families, carrying groceries, making phone calls, and convincing landlords of their social responsibility to our neighbors. I watched pastors give up their precious personal time, which, in many cases, redefined a day well beyond twenty-four hours. Radio stations devoted their costly airtime to making connections between those in need and those who lived in abundance. School districts exceeded their normal enrollments and provided after-school tutoring *and* nurturing. Cell phone companies donated at least one cell phone per family. Mental health organizations worked overtime to provide counseling and PTSD care. Corporations loaned staff, equipment, and made generous donations. Television news personnel anonymously provided food and shelter. Churches provided spiritual direction and transportation to and from local businesses. Washington came to *us* to learn how local and federal arms of the government can work harmoniously together.

We raised the bar, and I was proud to be a Coloradan and witness the altruism running from vein to vein, heart to heart, and soul to soul. In a twenty-four month period, the story of the Good Samaritan came to life in Colorado, and I was proud to be a part of the story.