

Recovery in a Time of Crisis: Responding to Katrina

The New Recovery Advocacy Movement in America has spawned grassroots organizations across the country whose volunteers are bestowing the fruits of their recovery upon local communities. The service ethic within these local groups stands as a beacon of hope to individuals and families wounded by alcohol and other drug problems. The activities of these groups offer living proof that recovery gives back to individuals, families and communities what addiction has taken. In August 2005, the nation was horrified by images of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi and the human suffering left in its wake. An untold story in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was the role recovery community advocacy organizations played in assisting those who had been displaced by Katrina. The following interview provides a glimpse of how recovery advocates responded to this crisis.

Joe Powell is executive director of the Association of Persons Affected by Addiciton (APAA) in Dallas, Texas.

Bill White: Joe, Where does your personal story as a recovery advocate begin?

Joe Powell: I spent five years, from age 15 to age 20, shooting heroin on the streets of Harlem in New York City. After a failed geographical escape to Chicago, I enlisted in the military in hopes I would get some of that good dope in Vietnam I was hearing about. That's the kind of suicide mission I was on at that point in my life. I ended up going to treatment in the military. My alcohol problems increased after I stopped using heroin in Waco, Texas. But in Dallas, I was at a community meeting when this lady friend of mine said to me, "If you want some help, there's an old guy that's gonna come in here, and you can ask him for help with your drinking problem." And I said, "What kinda help?" And she said, "Well, you ain't gotta worry about that. Just ask the old guy, and he'll help you." And sure enough, the old dude walked in there, and I asked him to help me. Turns out he was a psychiatrist who had been in recovery for more than 15 years. He helped me recover, encouraged me to go back to school and to get active as an advocate. I owe him and others a debt of gratitude I have been trying to pay back for many years.

Bill: You have been one of the driving forces behind the Association of Persons Affected by Addiction, a Dallas-based recovery advocacy and support organization. Tell me how APAA was founded.

Joe: APAA, Association of Persons Affected by Addiction, started in 1998 as a grassroots recovery advocacy organization. The bulk of our funding since then has come from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). We are an organization that honors all roads to recovery and serves people of all ages and stages of recovery throughout the community.

Bill: Describe how you first came to be involved in APAA.

Joe: I came to APAA as a recovering person and a licensed chemical dependency counselor who specialized in working with people with addictions and co-occurring mental illness. Lois Olson, who was then Executive Director of Dallas Helps, invited me to serve on her board and to help start APAA. I served as president of APAA early on and later assumed the role of Executive Director.

Bill: What kind of recovery support services did APAA provide in its early years?

Joe: In our early days, we provided recovery coaches, recovery support groups and recovery education—a six-part Recovery 101 class. We also helped people in recovery with job readiness and helped them find sober housing. Our message was "You are not alone. We've been there

too and can help you find your way.” We provided people seeking recovery with a broad range of instrumental, informational, companionship and emotional support, but we emphasized that these were support services, not treatment services. We spent considerable time orienting people and linking them to Twelve Step groups and other recovery support structures such as our local recovery ministries, our local Afro-centric recovery support group, Hope in the Hood, and our local Dual Recovery Anonymous groups.

Bill: On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina brought catastrophe to New Orleans and coastal Louisiana and Mississippi. How did you and the APAA members become involved with those affected by Katrina?

Joe: I got the call before Katrina hit from a friend of mine, Samantha Hope-Atkins, the executive director of We Recover, a recovery advocacy organization in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Sam called me about a week before Katrina expressing her concern that we should be prepared for the potential aftermath of the hurricane. She called me in part because I am on the board of Faces & Voices of Recovery and the regional representative of the three states projected to be hit by the hurricane: Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The day that Katrina hit Louisiana, Sam called again but then her phone went out. I was concerned for her and all those being affected. Once we heard that 100,000 people displaced by the hurricane were coming to Texas and that about half of them were coming to Dallas, we knew we had to get quickly organized.

Bill: Describe the kind of help you offered.

Joe: We set up at the Reunion Arena and the Convention Center. The Convention Center was only supposed to hold 5,000 people, but there were almost 8,000 people there. So I decided the first day that APAA had to be there to provide support to those people in recovery or needing recovery who were affected by Katrina. We went to the Convention Center and after some crash training from the Red Cross we set up a table and put up a huge banner reading, “APAA Recovery Community Support Services” and got a room from the Red Cross to run support groups. We posted times that we would have support groups and walked through the Convention Center offering what support we could. A lot of people came to those groups to cry and to get support to get through those first days.

Bill: Was the larger recovery community involved in this support process?

Joe: First my board of directors volunteered to help and then we brought in a lot of local volunteers from Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon and Narcotics Anonymous. Once we figured out what the needs were, we called people like you, William Cope Moyers and Ron Hunsicker to see if we could get some help from around the country. The response was incredible: We had donated Bibles, Big Books and other recovery literature shipped in from all around the country and had offers of treatment and recovery home beds from Michigan to California.

Bill: What was it like personally for you and your cadre of volunteers?

Joe: It was such a draining job because we were there all day for days on end—close to a month. Witnessing and hearing people’s pain was very difficult, but it meant a lot to us to be able to offer so much in the face of such a horrible crisis. There was so much that people had lost—their families, their friends, their homes, their jobs, their clothes, and the personal keepsakes that defined them as a person. It was very overwhelming because people were so needy, but these folks were resilient too. We were touched by their toughness as much as by their pain.

Bill: Did you see people who themselves were impacted by Katrina but out of their recovery experience were reaching out and offering support to other people who were in those same circumstances?

Joe: Yes, we saw that at the Convention Center. It was moving to have people who were in recovery coming to ask us what they could do to help even when they were facing needs as great as others who were there. Today, many people displaced to Dallas following Katrina are still a part of APAA. They now reach out into the community and talk about their personal recovery and surviving Katrina.

Bill: I understand you've continued to be involved since this initial response.

Joe: Yes, I'm on the Katrina Task Force and am leading the cultural committee. It has been very important for us to address the loss of cultural supports experienced by the predominately African American people displaced from Louisiana and to recognize that African Americans in recovery had lost contact with the recovery culture that was the foundation of their health.

Bill: Is it true that you also found one of your best staff members in the middle of the Katrina crisis?

Joe: Actually two. I wanted to find someone from Louisiana who was displaced who we could hire to help provide recovery support services. By word-of-mouth, I heard about Michael Johnson, a licensed social worker displaced from the New Orleans area. We put together a grant and received funding from the Meadows Foundation to hire Michael to head a team of 10 recovery professionals in surveying the needs of some 5,000 people displaced by Katrina. Michael understands at a most personal level that it is support from the grassroots level that helps people heal and experience hope in the wake of such a disaster. And then there is Greg Williams. When the city saw what we were doing, they said, "We'll give you the money just to pay for one recovery specialist." So we hired Greg who's been doing a phenomenal job. He helped start a Katrina Survivor Association here in Dallas that has helped a lot of folks. We've got folks who continue to grow in their recovery because of the work that we're doing.

Bill: After having been through the Katrina aftermath, what do you think is the responsibility of a recovery advocacy organization in that kind of a crisis?

Joe: I think it's crucial that national and local recovery advocacy and support organizations reach out in the face of such a crisis. I saw firsthand how important such support can be for people whose lives have been devastated. And these organizations need to mount culturally appropriate responses to such events. Such events create an opening for service and a means of repaying one's gratitude. It was only through the gift of my own recovery that we were able to do what we did. We were simply passing on in a unique situation what others had given to us.

Bill: What lessons have you drawn from your experience working with those displaced by Katrina?

Joe: Experience matters. What people experienced through Katrina reminded me of my own developmental experience. I came out of Harlem in New York City and am a product of the turbulent civil rights movement of the '50s and the '60s when Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were assassinated. There were riots and buildings burning in my own neighborhood. Post traumatic stress disorder is something you can absorb from what's going on around you. It was real scary as a kid. I've got seven brothers and one sister, and out of eight of us, all of us became alcoholics, and four have serious mental illness. Environmental experience has a big part to do with that.

Culture matters too. Finding ways to offer recovery support within the framework of people's own cultural experience is the key. And I don't just mean ethnic culture. Dallas is a whole 'nother culture than New Orleans and people needed help to acclimate to it—to define their recovery in this new context. To be more open with our own recovery so other people can get help is a key. A lot of people were amazed to see a recovery organization so visibly involved in service work in the aftermath of Katrina and so willing to help them make this cultural transition from Louisiana to Texas.

Bill: Were there people who had their recovery strengthened or who entered recovery through the Katrina experience?

Joe Powell: Yes, both. We have several people who weren't in recovery when we first reached out to them but who are today because of the welcoming support they were offered in the days and months following Katrina. When we introduced ourselves and listened to people, some revealed to us that they had experienced alcohol or drug problems before Katrina. I remember picking up a lady and her two kids and two other people at the Convention Center and taking them to look at apartments. I started talking about my own recovery and both parents told me they were crack users and I was able to engage them right there in the car. There were some strange pathways into recovery following Katrina. And many people reinterpreted and came to understand more deeply the principles that had been the foundation of their recovery to get through the aftermath of Katrina.

Bill: As a final question, when you think back on the weeks and months following Katrina, what do you think is the very essence of recovery support in the midst of such a crisis?

Joe: As a first responder, the personal support and the groups were crucial in getting people through the overwhelming reality of their situations and helping people define their recovery in the context of such situations. Also important is the continued availability [of support] we can offer and being there emotionally for people after the acute crisis is over. What I want people to most understand is the important role we can play in strengthening people's recovery in times of crisis and to realize that crises provide an opening for people to enter recovery who have needed to do so for a long time. Being part of these processes and watching people survive tragedy and positively transform their lives is one of the many gifts of recovery.