

# Young Lawyers Division Disaster Legal



Guff Abbott, pictured left, from Oxford assisting with legal questions at the Moss Point Disaster Recovery Center.

Over two months have passed since Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Since that time, a steady stream of lawyers has poured into the Coast to provide legal assistance to those most affected by the disaster. These lawyers have been answering basic legal questions and solving problems related to landlord-tenant, insurance, mortgage, estate and domestic issues.

On November 1, 2005, FEMA opened the 33rd Disaster Recovery Center in Mississippi. The Young Lawyers Division has coordinated legal assistance in these counties. The DRC are open Monday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. The DRCs are either manned by a volunteer attorney or have the flyer with the hotline number. Those residents who visit these DRCs either meet with a lawyer

there on-site or are able to call the hotline at 1-866-255-4495, and a volunteer lawyer will call them back to discuss their legal problem. As of November 4, 2005, over 4,200 disaster survivors have sought legal assistance either through the hotline or at a DRC. **Over 310 Mississippi lawyers have worked at FEMA disaster recovery centers. At least 265 Mississippi lawyers have provided telephone legal assistance.** We have had over 55 out-of-state lawyers to volunteer to provide on site legal assistance or telephone assistance to disaster survivors.

That is a tremendous response. Yet the Young Lawyers Division still needs your help – providing legal assistance at the DRCs and over the telephone. If you want to travel to the coast, please indicate which DRC (Ocean Springs, Moss Point,



Jackson attorney, Cheri Green, taking care of the personal side of a Disaster Recovery Center on the Coast.

Waveland, Gulfport, or Biloxi) you are interested in manning and when you can go. If you can provide telephone assistance, please indicate the practice areas in which you can advise those who call the hotline. Please volunteer today by emailing [mhenry@msbar.org](mailto:mhenry@msbar.org) and indicating what assistance you are able to give.

## Gulf Coast Lawyer Opens Home

By Jay Sushelsky, AARP Foundation, Washington, D.C.

AARP Foundation attorney Jay Sushelsky got a taste of Mississippi hospitality on his recent trip to the state as a volunteer at the Gulfport FEMA Disaster Recovery Center. Sushelsky, qualified under The Mississippi Bar Young Lawyers Division Disaster Relief Legal Assistance Program to give *pro bono* legal assistance on storm related matters. In order to be near the Gulfport FEMA center, Sushelsky followed up on a lead from the Mississippi Bar office for lodging with Gulfport attorney Channing Powell and his wife, Lori.

Sushelsky's eyes light up when asked about his week-long stay at the Powell home. "It was far more than a place to say," he states. "I began a warm friendship with Lori and Channing that I look forward to growing in the days to come. They took me into their family, and I had a wonderful time."

Although Channing and Lori had evacuated their Gulfport home prior to Katrina's

strike upon the Gulfport coast, they returned soon after the storm to find their home in livable condition, even if not untouched. Their house and garage both suffered significant roof damage, but the Powell home interior managed to stay dry. Lori and Channing wasted no time expressing their gratitude for the blessing of their relative good fortune. Mindful of the lodging shortage for the influx of volunteer helping hands, they emailed the Bar offering to take in a volunteer attorney.

The three nights of lodging that the Powell's and Jay initially planned, at Lori and Channing's insistence turned into a week-long stay for Sushelsky at the Powell home, including a lot of discretionary time together. "At the end of my week in Gulfport, it seems that all three of us actually came into each other's lives," says Sushelsky. "I so looked forward to returning to the house at the end of a long and draining day at the FEMA Disaster Recovery

Center so that Lori, Channing and I could have dinner together and hang out for relaxing time. Lori is an extraordinary cook, and she made a point of introducing me to many local dishes, such as griade and grits, as well as making some of my favorites with her own creative flair."

Sushelsky, who is Jewish, even accepted the Powell's invitation to sit in on Sunday morning study at the Baptist church where Lori and Channing are very active. "I got a warm and open reception at church on Sunday, and the study discussion was engaging. But I most enjoyed the dinner that Lori and Channing hosted on Tuesday night at their home with a number of friends from church."

Says Sushelsky, "I came to Mississippi expecting to be challenged by a clash of culture. I left Gulfport awed by the resilience of the Katrina storm victims and gratified by the rich and bountiful friendship that I made with Lori and Channing Powell."

# Hurricane Katrina Assistance



Amanda Jones, Young Lawyers Division President, and Tana Vollandorf, Gulfport DRC Coordinator, review the volunteer listings for each center. The Disaster Recovery Centers in Waveland, Gulfport, Biloxi, Ocean Springs, and Moss Point will be manned into the month of December.



Over 200 Mississippi lawyers were trained in September on Consumer Finance, Landlord/Tenant and Insurance. The five CLE seminars were sponsored by different organizations each week – the Bar's Litigation/General Practice Section, the University of MS Law School, Mississippi College School of Law and the Young Lawyers Division Board of Directors.



Amanda Jones, at podium, welcomed the attendees to the Disaster Legal Assistance Training at the Mississippi Bar Center. Lecturers included Jeffrey Jackson, seated left, and Rod Clement, seated to right. A training DVD was made for anyone not able to attend a seminar who would still like to be trained.

Hurricane Katrina  
Disaster Legal Assistance  
Hotline Number  
1-866-255-4495

## Can You Help Me Find My Daughter?

By Harold D. Miller, Jr., Jackson, MS\*

"Can you help me find my daughter?" came over the phone. "Sir?" was my confused answer. "I don't understand your question." "I last heard from her the day before Katrina, and I can't find her." Thus began a conversation inquiring as to who he had called with suggestions from me as to other possible sources of information.

"Can you help me bury my brother?" "Pardon me?" "My brother is in a funeral home on the Coast. All of his papers are lost and we can't arrange for his funeral. I don't know if he had a will, or what his Social Security Number is. What do I do?"

These are not exactly the type legal questions we thought we would be answering on the Hurricane Katrina Disaster Legal Assistance Hotline maintained by the Young Lawyers Division. But they are part of the myriad situations created by this disaster.

Total confusion on the part of the victims is the order of the day. Some caused by conflicting statements from government agencies. Others by understandably misunderstanding the law. Some believe that landlord-tenant laws have been suspended. Some confuse the moratorium on

certain federally insured loans as suspending all debt obligations. Some believe rent obligations are suspended in a natural disaster such as Katrina. Total absolute confusion.

Child custody questions abound. One parent taking a child out of state for safety and refusing to return the child to its custodial parent. Failure to pay alimony or child support. What does this have to do with Katrina? It was the precipitating force.

Landlord and tenant situations are the most common call to the hotline. Some believe (or hope) that Katrina suspends the obligation to pay rent. Others see this disaster as the opportunity to terminate leases for those having difficulty paying rent. Human nature shows its beautiful and ugly side. One rapidly realized that landlord-tenant laws were meant for an orderly and logical society, and leave much to be desired in piecing through the remnants of a disaster.

What do the callers want from the hotline? Mainly, to be listened to. To be cared about. They have been hurt and want the comfort of human sharing. The hotline

gave this. Legal solutions? Law is for a perfect situation where there is time to reflect and act. Situations caused by a disaster call for immediate imperfect solutions. The frustration of the hotline is that one explains the law to the caller realizing that the immediacy requires the cooperation of the parties for there to be a solution. This is not courtroom law. This is street law. This is law applied in a disaster.

Was it worth it? Unequivocally yes. The Young Lawyers Division and the innumerable volunteers are to be commended for their efforts. They were there at a time of need, not only as counselors, but as caring human beings.

What did service on the hotline demonstrate? That disaster and adversity brings out the best and worst in us. In this case, primarily the best as, with rare exception, the callers were polite and appreciative of the attention. To borrow from Faulkner, it proved that we shall not only prevail, but we shall triumph.

\*Reflections from four 8-hour days on the Hotline fielding 50 to 70 calls per day.