

Pitching In When It Really Counts

Student Bus Drivers From Texas A&M University Help Hurricane Evacuees

by

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Texas A&M University hurricane relief efforts focused on housing evacuees in Reed Arena. Another group of students were in San Antonio, shuttling evacuees from planes landing at Kelly Air Force Base to shelters in and around the city. "We are pleased that we were able to respond quickly to assist the victims of this tragic event," said Rod Weis, director of Transportation Services.

Weis said his department quickly took action on Friday, September 2nd, after receiving word that assistance was needed to help hurricane victims. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials helped to coordinate the evacuation of 25,000 people from New Orleans to San Antonio. A caravan of ten buses complete with twenty-three student drivers, four managers and four University Police Department representatives left for San Antonio that Friday morning just after midnight, as soon as they received coordinating approval from Governor Perry's office.

"When we left at midnight, we didn't really know what we would be doing but we knew we wanted to help. We had no idea what to expect," said Cash Donaho, a senior aerospace engineering student from Victoria who drove one of the shuttle buses.

A second wave of Texas A&M buses was dispatched to San Antonio the following day. The buses are normally used for shuttling students across the University's large campus and to and from apartment complexes throughout portions of the Bryan-College Station community that surrounds the campus.



Photo Courtesy of University Relations

"It was something to tell your grandkids about" was the way John Walter described the experience of seeing and helping the evacuees. He said most of the evacuees he met were upbeat by the time they got on his bus.

Amy Hahn, a senior English major, described her sadness in seeing the evacuees: "They had nothing. It (interacting with them) helped me understand what went on in New Orleans."

Michael Kruppa, a sophomore agricultural development major, offered perhaps the most telling depiction of the evacuees' plight, recalling how one of them recalled "how happy he was to finally see a Port-a-potty." Kruppa said he would "definitely do it again, if asked," referring to his stint helping the evacuees. "We were in awe by what was happening, but our students did a wonderful job and I'm very proud of all of them for the job they did," said Lynn Wiggs, a manager with Transportation Services. Wiggs said the first shelter filled up fast and two more shelters had to be opened. One of the alternate shelters was in a mall that had been closed. "We saw people wearing surgical gear because they had been wearing contaminated clothes and had to be given other clothing. Some had been plucked off a rooftop by a helicopter and dropped off at an airport and put on a plane. They had to ask us 'where are we' because they had no idea," Donaho said.

Another student driver, Shane Danner, a senior finance major at Texas A&M from Pearland, said he felt like he needed to do more to help. When the second group of ten additional buses and twenty drivers arrived at 5 pm Saturday, September 3rd, Danner said many of the original drivers wanted to stay. "We were tired and had no sleep, but none of us wanted to leave."

Danner, who also is a volunteer firefighter, said he and some of the others planned to go to Reed Arena and see if more help is needed there. Reed Arena is one of four shelters open in the area and it housed 208 survivors who arrived in buses from Dallas and Houston. ♦

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