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Look for the Helpers

John Carlson, MD, PhD

Yesterday a patient asked me, “Did you cure the kids with Ebola when you went to Africa?” The truth is that I wanted to do so much more for the children who I saw in Sierra Leone 6 months ago. So many children died such painful deaths. Many children survived as orphans. When discussing disasters with children, it is important to be honest, but the level of detail should be tailored to the child’s level of maturity. I told her that we weren’t able to cure all of the kids, and some died, but I told her that there were many people who did help. I took that line from Mr. Rogers who once told viewers, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”

The conversation turned to Hurricane Katrina. My patient was a little girl when the levees were breached and her New Orleans East community was flooded. Ten years ago I evacuated with my family to Lafayette, Louisiana, and began working at a makeshift evacuee center in the Cajundome. I saw people with chronic medical conditions, poorly controlled because medications had been left at home and exacerbated by the stress of the evacuation. I even saw one little girl who I had helped care for on the cardiology service at Tulane Hospital. Her mom described to me the stress of carrying her daughter and bag of medications through the floodwaters, trying to escape the city. I refilled her prescriptions, but the greatest help was probably being there to listen to her. There were thousands of others helping in Lafayette. There was a minister and his church that opened up their

facility to house the newborns that are at risk if they get the infections that quickly spread through crowded places. A friend of mine volunteered to go into the city to conduct mosquito surveillance. There were so many people doing what they could to help.

But just as I softened the details about the children I saw in Sierra Leone, I also did not tell my patient of the worries that I have for New Orleans now. The road leading up to the clinic has plenty of abandoned lots, violence remains a problem, and lack of jobs disenfranchises young adults. After finishing for the day, I spoke with the chief medical officer of the clinic, Dr. Keith Winfrey. He is an impressive man, determined to provide excellent care to this community that he loves. He is steadfast in support of the clinic and determination to do what he can for his patients. We talked about the ReNEW charter network’s passionate school nurses, our dedicated pediatric residents, the inspiring youth at the community organization VAYLA down the street. It is heartening to reflect on the quality of our partners. Ten years later, I think it is still important to look for the helpers.

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