

Tropical Storm Fay: A Night of Gold:

It had been 26 hours since I left home. I had been following the summer Olympics for the past two weeks. I had not had a chance to read or watch anything related to the Olympics in the last 26 hours.

The first wave of those eating at the cafeteria were from the STAR Family Center. A place where families and medically needy can live to get a “leg up on life”. Two meals are prepared for this group each day. Karen had begun preparing the chicken earlier in the day; peas, mashed potatoes, and tossed salad would complement dinner. Desert was chocolate flared pudding and a muffin. Eight loaves of buttered bread were also prepared. “Two adults and three children” a father would politely announce as he arrived at the serving line. The five plates would be prepared. This pattern followed until all were served.

On this particular night the residents did not have to stack the chairs and clean the floor as is their usual custom. Tonight the cafeteria would serve as a temporary shelter for those seeking refuge from Tropical Storm Fay. The shelter would not be open for those chased from the comfort of their homes. The people seeking shelter would be from the street. Fay was not being a very hospitable host. Now, Fay may not have been a hurricane, however, when faced with no place to seek shelter, any storm is frightening. Fay had been even particularly brutal. She lingered. She soaked those on the street to the bone. The homeless were would not be forgotten. The volunteers from the local church groups took care of the preparation, services and cleaning. One married couple, of whom the husband was a 30 year veteran with the U.S. Army, was a member of this evening’s volunteer group. He recounted that in 1991 he rolled across the Iraqi desert in Operation Freedom. What brought them together tonight, and the other nights they volunteer, was the reward of serving this group of vulnerable homeless children and adults. A liberating experience close to home.

It was well before 6:00 p.m. when the guests began arriving. A total of 45 men and woman were expected. Karen had already prepared a second meal of pineapple, sausage and ham stew over rice, accompanied with sweet potatoes and green beans. A couple of pieces of sliced bread filled the cracks. Banana pudding and muffins were served for dessert. Revered Ray Kelly was the designated leader of this second volunteer group. Ray’s voice filled the air,” We’re here tonight because we love you. And tonight you will love each other”. There would be no fighting, no arguing, and no stealing on this night. Not even a cross word was heard. A blessing was said over the food and the men and women ate the hearty meal prepared by caring hands. After dinner the tables were broken down and set against the wall by the guests. Chairs were stacked. Exercise mats were handed out along with heavy blankets. The men and women found space on the floor. Backpacks served as pillows. Some used their shoes; perhaps a way to keep their most prized possession close. Some read and others watched a video bought in by a volunteer. Others drifted off to sleep not having to worry about waking up in the morning with ant bites or being soaked with the morning dew. Tonight was upscale on the cafeteria floor. I heard no complaints

Ray was assisted by his wife Susan. Others from Daytona Beach Outreach Center were also there. All with varying backgrounds: some in college, others had been homeless themselves or had battled addiction. They had walked a mile or two with the very people seeking shelter. They had been there, seeking shelter in the not so distant past. This group responded to the needs and request of those being sheltered. Throughout the night a lone hand would wave in the air. The guest would be assisted by the watchful volunteers. Some guests were literally lifted off the floor and into their wheel chairs. There was overwhelming support and compassion filling the room.

By 4:30 a.m. a few began to wake and headed off with a cup of coffee to day labor hall or their jobs. Others awoke and peered outside with the element of false security. Many had thought Fay passed during the night. How wrong we all were.*

By 6:00 a.m. Bess, the cook who for 13 years has been feeding the homeless arrived to a cry of "Praise God". This excitement was, in part, that she arrived safely in foul weather. But, but her arrival also signaled a near end to long night for the volunteer crew. She began preparing scrambled eggs, grits, warm biscuits and muffins. By 7:00 a.m. the meal was consumed and the clean up commenced. All pitched in. The mats were put away. The blankets folded. The floor cleaned. By 7:30 this group was ushered back onto the streets. Just in time for the return of Fay.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, knowing the weather had taken turn for the worse, plans where being made for the coming night of rain. As those who had no shelter huddled under the canopy outside of the STAR Center it was evident that something needed to happen. Fay change course and so did the local homeless service providers. The cafeteria would be open for two more nights.

After arriving home, I glanced at the newspaper. The headline said that gold went to one of our gymnast and another to a swimmer. That is a good thing. I could not help but to think how many gold medals in the last 24 hours were awarded. Funny though, none of them had anything to do with the Olympics.

*(Shortly after this experience Bright House donated cable and TVs that currently hang in the Cafeteria and waiting area at the Homeless Assistance Center to provide weather updates to the homeless).