Sister Mary Joan Mike, OSF

Principal, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Biloxi, Mississippi

Sister Mary Jo is still living the effects of Hurricane Katrina—four years later. Biloxi is an ocean front town on the Gulf of Mexico and didn't get the media coverage New Orleans did. Unlike the "Big Easy" where water came in, sat and then receded, in Biloxi the storm pounded the coast line for 15 hours and washed away 85% of its homes and businesses. Things still are not fully recovered. The main highway reopened just last fall, the city's sewage system is run by a generator, and several of the school's families are not back in their homes.

Katrina taught Sister Mary Jo a lot about hands on ministering. Her school was a half block from the Gulf and, except for the gym roof falling in, did not suffer extensive damage. As one of the few buildings still standing, the school became a relief center for first responders. The kitchen was a 24 hour food center. The playground became a tent city for emergency equipment. Sister collected and organized a basic resource center where people came for months to get clothes, bedding, and basic necessities.

The school mission of supporting the mind, body and soul of every student took on a very different meaning after Hurricane Katrina. The parish came together and formed a disaster relief team to find and help people impacted by the storm. People lost everything and the basics, like a clean pair of pants, carried a lot more meaning than in normal times.

"Our world was completely and forever changed," said Sister Mary Jo. "We spent a lot of time listening to people's needs. We learned a lot from this experience and now understand what is important when something of this magnitude happens. When Hurricane Ike hit last fall we put together Christmas shoe boxes with little, but important, items like toothbrushes and fresh underwear because we knew firsthand what people would need."

The phrase in the mission of the Sylvania Franciscan that says "live the Gospel in joyful servanthood among all people" has taken on a special meaning for Sister Mary Jo. While it is hard to find a silver lining in anything as devastating as a hurricane, it did give her an opportunity to witness and minister in a way that she wouldn't have had otherwise.

MISSION STATEMENT

Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania, Ohio

Called like Francis of Assisi to live the Gospel in joyful servanthood among all people, the Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania, Ohio as messengers of peace, commit themselves to works that reverence human dignity, embrace the poor and marginalized, and respect the gift of creation.