

Bar member works with rescue effort, helps volunteers deal with devastation

Jim Early Jr., the Quality of Life Committee chair for the North Carolina Bar Association, used to hunt quail in the Tarboro area before Hurricane Floyd devastated 30 nearby eastern counties in North Carolina in mid-September.

Last fall, however, he hunted corpses. Dozens of them. He helped the North Carolina Army National Guard and the Kentucky National Guard's combined Disaster Mortuary Unit retrieve flooded caskets and bag unidentified bodies. For one week, Early worked during the day along side the National Guard, and at night provided stress-relief management seminars for them at their camp near Tarboro.

"The people in these areas lost everything—even their history. No family pictures. No love letters. No report cards from their children. I felt I had to do something," says Early of Winston-Salem.

A week after Floyd hit and an important trial ended, Early packed his car with half of his own wardrobe to donate to victims, along with a \$5,000 personal check in memory of a deceased client.

"I guess I could have mailed the check and the clothes. But I wanted to take them myself. These people needed them right now," he recalls.

Early met with commanders to decide how to best utilize his volunteer effort. Once he saw first-hand the devastation before him, he briefly returned home to grab a week's worth of clothing and his fly-fishing waders and rubber gloves.

On Sept. 16, Floyd drenched the region with 20 inches of rain, which overflowed the Tar River and flooded Tarboro and submerged Princeville, a town of 1,900 originally settled by freed slaves after the Civil War. The

flood had swooshed through cemeteries, sucking up caskets and forcing them downstream. When waters finally receded, caskets, bodies and various debris were found.

Early's first glance of the ruins mirrored a Stephen King novel. When the fog lifted, he viewed homes that were caked with dirt, with water trickling from them like tears. Some caskets were standing straight up. No birds sang. No dogs barked. No sound, except the rescue workers who slogged around in rubber suits and the rumble of motors from heavy moving equipment.

Early assisted the workers as they placed corpses in bags and piled them along with caskets onto an 18-wheeler enclosed trailer, which transported the remains to a warehouse transformed into a temporary mortuary. To relieve the extra weight of the flooded caskets, pick axes punctured holes in them to drain the excess liquid and stench.

"You needed a strong stomach to be near there and to deal with the smells of whatever we were wading through," he says.

Like Early, the volunteers wore waders and rubber gloves while treading through mud, slime and water that contained run-off from nearby pig farms, septic tanks, gasoline tanks and fertilizer plants. To block the putrid odors, they packed their nostrils with Vicks Vapor Rub and smoked cigars.

"I learned very quickly that what they saw all day was so brand new and so frightening that it hadn't registered yet," Early notes.

At night, he provided stress-relief and management seminars to between 35 to 50 weary soldiers. By the end of the week, he had reached about 300 through seminars where they discussed concerns about children, mar-

riages or work. He helped the soldiers relieve the stress they arrived with and endured as they tackled swamps filled with death. Early provided tips on how to identify stress-related problems and how to relieve stress. The information he passed on was based

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on his own research while serving on the bar's Quality of Life Committee and 35 years as a domestic and civil trial lawyer.

His most touching moments came when the soldiers later came up to him. "They would take my hand or just shake my hand. They appreciated me coming down and being with them," Early says.

After Early's weeklong effort, the troops retrieved a total of 181 caskets. An Associated Press report said 224 caskets were retrieved with 15 unidentified bodies. Re-burials were being planned. Hurricane Irene hit about a month later, but was not as devastating.

"I will never forget this experience. It was meaningful to be there to help and know you were making a difference," Early adds.

—Anna Marie Kukec