



News

A hurricane of help

by [Steve Coomes, Senior Editor](#) * 09 September 2005

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

— **Margaret Mead, anthropologist**

Like hundreds of seaman at Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Jimmy Reichle received a letter from his commanding officer, urging him to contribute to Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. But unlike most of his shipmates, Reichle saw an opportunity to do much more than pony up several cases of water to the cause. He recognized a golden opportunity for his parents in Olmsted Falls, Ohio.

From Jacksonville, Fla., Reichle called his father, Jim, co-owner of four-unit Angelina's Pizza, to discuss what they could do as a group. Reichle and his wife, Ann, also his business partner, had led community fundraisers before, and Jimmy figured they'd want to help out again.

He figured correctly; his father and stepmother were champing at the bit to lend a hand. But what none of the Reichles ever anticipated was the response they'd get. "We were sure we could fill at least one semi," said Jim Reichle. "And then the donations started coming so fast, we knew we'd need more trucks. Until about a day before we had to leave, we didn't know how many we'd need."

Soon after a news release was sent to local media outlets (Olmsted Falls is located near Cleveland), donors started turning up at every Angelina's location with cash and trunk-loads of non-perishable supplies.

"It was insane," said Ann Reichle. "People would walk up to our door, see the sign that we were collecting, they'd go to the DrugMart next door and come back with all kinds of things. These people were dying to give because they were so frustrated with all they'd seen on TV."

A pair of local food brokers got in on the action and started phoning distributors for donations. Soon after, palates of food and beverages arrived. Unable to handle the flow of supplies, a loading dock at a nearby landscaping company was used to sort and palatize the goods.

"It was a nightmare to get it all sorted," said Ann Reichle. To speed distribution in disaster areas, the Navy demanded all supplies be packaged by type and on palates. "We were stealing boxes out of the dumpster at DrugMart because we were running out. If we didn't get it on a palate, we stuffed things like bags of clothes into nooks and crannies."

Drivers wanted

I-77 begins in Cleveland and runs through Fort Mill, S.C., home to Siler Chapman, owner of two Ice Cream & Pizza Works operations. Chapman and Ann Reichle met several months ago at a pizza tradeshow, and Reichle wondered if Chapman would want to piggyback onto the relief effort passing through his town. The 22-year-old not only wanted a piece of the action, he assured Reichle he could fill a 53-foot semi trailer if they could get him one.

Chapman had 29 hours to make good on his promise, so he began calling every name in his cell phone directory — all 200 of them.

"I basically called a lady who knows a lot of people in town, told her what was going on and that I needed help," said Chapman. "The community came together big time. The biggest support came from church friends. It was announced in four different congregations that Sunday."

Needing cash to buy supplies, Chapman hustled off to a golf course where his grandfather was playing with several other men. After delivering a quick chat for help, he left the course with commitments for \$5,000.

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several other men. After delivering a quick plea for help, he left the course with commitments for \$5,000. Other donations poured in and amounted to 21 pallets of supplies — just one pallet shy of the 22 needed to ensure the full trailer he promised Reichle.

To ensure the diesel engines wouldn't run dry en route to Florida, the Reichles solicited cash donations for fuel. Jim Reichle's long-time auto mechanic wrote him a check immediately, as did his business attorney. When the Cleveland Ritz Carlton wouldn't donate to the cause, several angered employees collected \$700 on their own and bought gas cards. Many other donors simply opened up their wallets and handed over loose bills.

Knowing the truck drivers would need rest along the way, Jim Reichle worked to get teams in each truck. When they came up one short, Chapman, who also owns a car hauling company, said he'd drive the leg from Fort Mills to Jacksonville. The company that donated the trucks, however, wouldn't allow him behind the wheel because he only had a commercial driver's license permit. So back to the phone he went.

And with Jim Reichle and the trucks now in Fort Mills, a driver emerged — but with a catch.

"He said he'd drive if he could be back by Tuesday for work," said Jim Reichle. "But since Siler couldn't drive, he said he'd follow us in his own car and bring the guy back when we were done."

Still, Reichle was hesitant about letting a stranger drive the truck. So to put him at ease, the driver asked a police officer dining at Chapman's restaurant if he'd check his CDL and his credentials. The officer stepped away from his dinner, went to his squad car and radioed in the request.

"The driver's record was pristine," Jim Reichle said. "So then the driver asked me, 'Are we good to go now?' And I said, 'Yeah, we're good to go.'"

With about eight hours left on their journey, Reichle worried that weigh station monitors might give them trouble; none of their trucks had been weighed, nor did they have written inventories of their cargoes. What the group did have was far more valuable: papers from the airbase's commanding officer explaining the group's purpose.

"We showed the letter at a weigh station, and the guy was like, 'You're wasting time getting there. Go on through,'" said Jim Reichle. "It was like this hand was opening doors all the way down there. It was amazing."

At 5:30 a.m., Sept. 5, the trucks pulled into the airbase. The commander — who said he'd never seen a private donation so large — directed the men to a hangar, where they spent four hours unloading their three semis and a 24-foot box truck. When completed, the 125,000-pound cargo consumed half the floor space of an airplane/helicopter hangar.

The Navy would not say how or exactly when the supplies would be delivered, but it's likely they were taken to stricken areas the next day, Jim Reichle said.

Only the beginning

The Reichles were amazed at how many complete strangers trusted them, and the Navy, to deliver so much cash and supplies to the needy. Both said many donors expressed frustration over their inability to get through to the Red Cross to donate, and some said that relief organization's handling of 9/11-related funds steered them away from the agency for good.

"A lot said they didn't like the fact that money they'd donated to help victims of the terrorist attacks was spent on other things," Jim Reichle said. "We assured them that their money was only going to victims of the hurricane." Like many, Jim Reichle believes the hurricane relief effort will continue for some time, and he's expecting to make more trips down south. Cash remaining from the first aid drive will be used to fuel trucks for future trips, but at 300 gallons per fill-up, funds could dry up fast. "If we would have filled all those semis from empty, it would have cost close to three grand."

For the present, he said his volunteers will rest, regroup and look for the next pressing need. Many who donated

the first time said they're ready to do it again, and when they call comes, the Reichles and their supporters will be ready.

"We all know this isn't a one-time thing; these people are going to need help for a long time," Jim Reichle said.

"And people don't seem to care what it takes to help. They just want to help."

* *This is the first of more stories to come on efforts made by the pizza industry to help victims of Hurricane*



When the trucks were unloaded, Siler Chapman caught a 15-minute nap on the concrete.

Photo by Jim Reichle



Once unloaded, the 125,000-pound cargo consumed half the floor space of an aircraft hangar.

Photo by Jim Reichle

Katrina.

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