

Ask, Seek, and Knock at the Narrow Gate

Day 4

Monday Bob and I forgo lunch and drive our trucks down 7th Street looking for the turn to Mrs. Akers' place, our third home. This will be Tuesday's job. At the end of the street Bob turns left onto a muddy red clay road with a stand of small pines on both sides of the road. The road dead-ends into someone's yard a hundred yards after the turn.

Two FEMA trailers stand just past the turn on the right next to a doublewide placed about 3 feet up on piers of concrete block. The blocks are not cemented and all the blocks in each pier parallel the ones in the other piers. Another strong storm from the right direction might topple them all.

Bob pulls into the sandy front yard of the double wide with me in tow. We get out and walk around. Again litter of the same kind is scattered about the yard; broken furniture, a hairbrush, pieces of plastic floral arrangements, toiletry items washed out of houses by the water. I see a large pile of wood chips in the front left corner of the yard. I think the chips are used to keep down the mud from all the standing water in the yard.

Several plastic bags of trash sit on the roadside out front. A shallow ditch dug into the sandy soil runs from the side of the FEMA trailer to the ditch in the front yard. The doublewide has a big POSTED sign on the front window and an official-looking paper sign in the window that warns against inhabiting the under-construction building.

I find out from Bob that her original house took seven or eight feet of water. Josephine says she was told everything in it was ruined by mold. I guess they razed it. We conclude this doublewide is to be Josephine Akers' new home. It is a natural thing to call it the 'doublewide;' however, we are careful and respectful not to call it that. For us this is Josephine's hoped-for new home.

We look for someone in the two FEMA trailers to find out more about what we are to do here. A young pit bull pup strains on a short lease tied to the steps of one trailer and another slightly older, friendly pup is running around the yard eyeing us. I step over the shallow ditch and walk to door of the trailer with the dog out front. A green slime floats on a little water in the ditch. I know immediately what it is but do not want to think about it now. The sound of rap music plays inside the trailer. I knock on the door.

"Anybody home? Hello!"

After some shuffling in the trailer, a tall boy of fourteen or fifteen opens the door and looks at me with a small hint of suspicion. I introduce myself, "Hi! I'm Henry."

"I'm Joshua."

I surmise he is Josephine's son and wonder to myself, "No school today?"

"We are looking for Mrs. Akers. Do you know where she is? We are here to do some work on her new home that she is moving into."

The young man corrects me, "You mean the home she's trying to move into."

"Is it ok for us to look into the house to see what we need to do?"

"Yeah, sure."

So Bob and I climb the steps to her home. Someone has been here before us. The bottom 30 inches of drywall is stripped and that needs to be replaced. I am puzzled though why this trailer only has 30 inches of damage. The kitchen ceiling and walls are already stripped and dry walled. When we enter the kitchen I notice brown water stains streak the ceiling of the adjacent dining room. The storm must have damaged the roof and allowed water onto the ceiling.

In the master bath, the drywall is gone and the bare studs stand exposed. The flooring has been stripped down to the plywood underlay and a new shower stall waits in the middle of the room to be installed. This looks to be a fairly fast job.

Outside we survey the rear of the trailer. There is a rusty V-8 automobile engine and five or ten corroded alternators on the ground on the left side, all probably damaged beyond repair by the salty water. Water stands maybe twenty feet back to the rear of the home at the edge of the swamp. The mosquitoes are really bad. They bite through the shirt.

In the rear, Katrina ripped off part of the vinyl siding. Both ends of the trailer are bare to the wood or to old loosely hanging, weathered tarpaper. The soffit is damaged. From the outside, the edge of the new drywall ceiling of the rear bathroom is visible through the side of the trailer. If this isn't fixed, the house will sustain more damage from the rain. I remember there's some siding at the recovery center. We could use that to repair the wall. But there is a problem that probably explains the water damage to the ceiling of the dining room. The front half the house is displaced or scissored laterally about two inches relative to the rear. This trailer must have been sustained damage by the flood and been brought here from higher ground elsewhere after Katrina. Since the front half and rear half are no longer exactly square but have an awkward

bump in both side walls it makes the siding a hard problem to solve. Besides, vinyl siding is not in our plans. We will leave that for the next crew.

We arrive in force Tuesday morning as a well-oiled machine and tackle the drywall. By 3:30 in the afternoon we finish all the drywall and stand around swatting mosquitoes and debating what to do about the siding on the ends of the trailer. Bob and Tom listen to a woodpecker out in a tall pine a block away. One of the two thinks they hear another one in the tree in front of us. I chuckle when a mockingbird flies out.

Bill decides to locate some tarpaper at the Recovery Center. The least we can do is redo the tarpaper so we keep the water out. We decide we will just put up the new tarpaper and the next crew can install the siding. We use our limited scaffolding and several ladders. Several of the guys tackle and strip the old tarpaper. Someone in our group decides we can pull some of the remaining siding from the side to make a good patch on the rear where a few strips are absent.

We all realize the obvious at the same time: We are going to fix the siding. Although it is not exactly a perfect match, the donated siding at the Recovery Center will work and hardly be noticed on the ends, if at all. Several of us stay and get the new tarpaper up while the rest go back and retrieve the siding at the DRC. We are all thinking so much for finishing Mrs. Akers' today and our schedule.

When the guys return we split and go to both ends. One crew works low on one end while the other uses the scaffolding and ladders to work high on the other side. We even repair the soffits. When we finish it is well after dark at the time when the bugs really bite with vicious intensity. I'm covered in 100% DEET but one mosquito still draws blood on my arm. We end up quite late for dinner, but we have given Josephine new siding, drywall, installed her shower enclosure and the house is ready for mudding.

Josephine works as a dietary LPN at a home for elderly and disabled a good drive away from Pearlington. We never see her while we work on her new home. We finally meet her in the DRC mess tent at the special Thursday dinner for everyone whose home's we'd worked and for all the volunteers, not just us.

Mrs. Acker tells us all about Pearlington, especially the Recovery Center.

"Hundreds of people in Pearlington depend on the relief center here at Charles Murphy Elementary School for all their necessities, from washing their clothes to picking up groceries.

This (place) is very important to me and everybody in Pearlinton. People have a place to come get food, clothing, and the medical center over there. A few months after Katrina hit the local school board tried to close the DRC. They had already closed the school. We raised enough of a ruckus that they relented after razing two of the school buildings. They left only the gym where the 'Pearl Mart' is and the library and old classrooms where you all stay."

At dinner that Thursday, Josephine cannot stop bragging about her two boys or the Recovery Center. She's a tough woman facing a rocky road to a new home, but she smiles the whole time we talk.