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PARSONS
ORANGE COUNTY

They Didn't Send Their Help, They Brought It

One promotes surfing events, another owns a restaurant, another is a high-profile attorney.

In a few basic ways, they're like the rest of us. They saw what happened to the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina was through with it, and they were astounded. They sat slack-jawed as they realized what faced their fellow human beings and wished they could go down there and help out.

At that point, the three Orange County men separated themselves from the rest of us: They went.

I come not to chastise the rest of us for staying here; I come to praise the three and untold others like them from across the country who didn't stay.

Obviously, not everyone can interrupt their life and head for a storm-ravaged area. But more of us could do it than actually do. That's not an indictment; it's just the way we are. It doesn't make our sympathies any less real or our desire to help any less benevolent.

Frank Garcia could have stayed home. No one would have blamed him. After all, he's fed people for free every Thanksgiving for the last 19 years at his Anaheim restaurant, La Casa Garcia. The numbers now go into the thousands.

When he saw TV coverage of Katrina, he first wanted to help through the Red Cross. Then he decided it would be quicker to go himself. On Saturday, he and 10 others from across Southern California left in a van for Corpus Christi, Texas, where hundreds of hurricane victims are in limbo. With a giant portable kitchen provided by Jay's Catering in Garden Grove, Garcia and crew hope to feed 1,500 people a day.

"I'm a doer," Garcia said Friday afternoon. "I'm not a wanna-be. When I saw the news, I said, 'Thank God I can afford to do it.'" Garcia hopes to be in Cor-

pus Christi, which is near where he grew up, for two weeks.

Joe Cavallo is a snazzy-dressing, fancy car-driving, hard-charging attorney who riled lots of people for his defense of Greg Haidl, one of three young men convicted on sexual assault charges this year. On Friday morning, he headed for a Salvation Army camp in Biloxi, Miss., according to friend and fellow attorney Peter Scalisi. After that, Scalisi said, Cavallo's plan was to head for New Orleans.

I couldn't reach Cavallo, but Scalisi said his buddy went because "he has a great sense of humanity and felt really bad for the victims down there. Joe's been blessed with a lot of the finer things in life" and wanted to give something back, Scalisi said. The idea isn't to provide lawyering. "He's up to his elbows in grime and grit and hard work," Scalisi said late Friday afternoon, having talked to Cavallo during the day.

Mike Sharp does "big-wave surfing projects" in his normal life. Seeing that Katrina took normalcy away from hundreds of thousands of people, he acted. Using his knowledge of the water and how to get places in boats, he hooked up with some friends and drove to New Orleans. Once there, they used boats to rescue stranded residents.

I asked him my question for the day: What made him turn sympathy into action?

"I didn't fight in any wars, didn't make any great sacrifices, I just live a great life in Newport Beach," he said Friday afternoon. "It's not like my father who put his life on the line in World War II and Korea. I figured it was about time to get in there and help people, because if Orange County got hit, I sure hope people from other places would come and help us."

Sharp's five-day New Orleans trip repeated a similar mission he made to Sumatra after the tsunami. Sharp wasn't critical of those who think about helping but don't. "I might have been in that category before, until I went to the tsunami and just came to realize that I had skills that were of use in a crisis situation and it would be wrong not to bring them to bear."

All the words are nice. The sentiments are grand.

And yet, I keep thinking: All three could have sent in a check, said some prayers, hoped for the best.

Instead, all three went.

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