

Disaster Victim Overcomes Struggle to Accept Christ

"I believe. I believe."

Marilyn Sides thought she had heard everything. But as those whispers grew louder, she could hardly believe her own ears.

In the six years since her first Billy Graham Rapid Response Team deployment (Katrina in 2005), Sides has had the privilege of leading many storm survivors to Christ and has experienced deep heartache, praying for those who have lost everything.

But along came Leonia, and Sides' view of how the Holy Spirit works may never quite be the same.

Leonia used to live in New Orleans until Hurricane Katrina poured over nine feet of water into her home. Seeking to rebuild a new life, she moved to Tuscaloosa, Ala., with her husband, who died shortly after.

On April 28, when a deadly tornado tore through Tuscaloosa, the widow was fortunate to only have lost a tree in the front yard.

Leonia would later find new life in Christ.

But first, she would have to wrestle with the eternal truth that Jesus died for her sins.

Leonia couldn't grasp it, telling Sides: "I'm sorry, I just don't get it. I've been to Jerusalem and know He was a good man but I just can't understand how He would be God's son and certainly don't understand all that about Him dying for me."

Leonia ended the conversation. Sides continued to pray.

Finally, one night after Leonia had helped cook a meal for all

the volunteers, a group of about 50 shared what God had done that day. Sides was sitting next to Leonia, who started breathing heavily.

Had the Holy Spirit finally broke through?

Suddenly, Leonia was hitting Sides on her leg and whispered loudly: "I believe. I believe."

"You just knew it was the Holy Spirit revealing himself to her," Sides said. "You could just tell."

Sides turned and led Leonia in a prayer to accept Christ as her Savior.

"When I reached over to pray with her," Sides said. "I was shaking I was crying so hard."

Sides wasn't the only one in tears.

Just before the sharing time wrapped up, she announced to the group: "Here's our newest sister in Christ."

"Everyone started clapping. [Leonia] was crying like crazy," Sides said. "It was just one of those real profound things we got to see. Anytime the Lord speaks into someone's life, it's profound. But this time we got to see it."

"It was just beautiful."

After more than two months, the Rapid Response Team will pull out of Tuscaloosa this weekend, but not before making an eternal impact.

A total of 41 chaplains have ministered to over 2,500 survivors with dozens of decisions made for Christ.

Samaritan's Purse is finishing the "Cleanup Phase" on Saturday, transitioning to the "Rebuilding Phase."

"Lots and lots of work to be done," Sides said. "As a whole,

it's still in bad shape.

"I've talked to several people whose street looks like a war zone with only two houses left on the street."

The efforts of both the Rapid Response Team and Samaritan's Purse received a huge boost of encouragement from First Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, which opened its doors from the beginning and will continue to do so as the ongoing rebuilding efforts continue.

"It's neat when you come to a place and they participate and help and welcome you with open arms," Sides said.

This past Sunday night, First Baptist, led by Dr. Gil McKee, held a special service, honoring all of the volunteers with a slideshow in concert with a patriotic choir and orchestra that was emotional, encouraging and spiritually uplifting to the church and community.

"They had all the Samaritan's Purse volunteers and Billy Graham chaplains sit up front," Sides said. "You can tell God has made this church a lighthouse through this. They're doing some major outreach."

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