

## Why I Volunteer...

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### ***My son told me to call the Red Cross...***

*By Ramona Johnstone*

“My son told me ‘call the Red Cross if you need me’ when he learned he would be deployed in late 1990.” He was serving in the Army and the Gulf War was imminent. Ramona Johnstone was worried, like so many others. “How would I know if something happened to him?” Ramona admits that back then, she only vaguely knew what the Red Cross did, but she was curious about this connection with the military. Bruce, her son, told her about how the American Red Cross served as the communication link between service members and their families. When she was an ad in the paper asking for volunteers at the Red Cross, she decided to call. Little did she know that her visit to the Chapter, then, in a basement office on Market Street, would be a life-changing event. “They needed volunteers, so I did a little of this and a little of that and now, 12 years later, I’m still here!” Since then Ramona has become a Babysitter’s Training instructor, she and her husband, Bob, help out at Health and Safety fairs and she still helps in the office with ‘this and that’. In Red Cross lingo, she is cross-trained. Ramona likes to say, “I’m not cross, but I am cross-trained and I like to help whenever I can.”



### ***Why do I do what I do?***

*By Mary Jane Sheppard*

My life as a Red Crosser began 9 years ago when I was new to both Frederick and the United States. I decided to do some volunteer work and so I began my search to find an organization that reflected my own beliefs and goals, and one which made the best use of donor dollars. I found what I was looking for in the Red Cross.

Our fundamental principles reached out to me, and I, in turn, embraced them -- impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, universality. Pretty heady words, but more than words, for I soon learned that they would be the guide by which we would make our decisions, and the standard by which we would be measured. As we have been told so often, when we put on the vest, “We are the Red Cross” to whomever we meet. It is a mantle I wear with humility, respect, and pride.

Currently I am a Disaster Instructor, a supervisor in Individual Client Services and a Disaster Action Team member and captain, the role about which I will tell you now. Training is ongoing in Emergency Services, because it is our training that prepares us to respond when called upon. As a DAT member (the RC loves its acronyms) my team and I are on call one week of each month, from 6 AM to 6 PM, Monday through Friday, and 24 hours a day Saturday and Sunday. Most often our responses involve household fires. While the firemen look after the fire, we make sure that our clients have dry clothes, food to eat, and a place to stay. But more importantly, we make sure they know that they are not facing this often life-changing event alone. We are there to see them through. Most often it is not so much what we do that helps, but the fact that we are simply there. It is our presence that provides the comfort; it is the Red Cross on our backs that engenders trust.

In any disaster, from the single family home to the horror that was Katrina and 9/11, the grief, loss, and fear can be overwhelming. But as responders, we are there to be our clients' advocates. We are the ears that let them tell their story; the first step towards acceptance and healing. We are the hands that bring the blanket to warm, and who give the teddy bears to chase away the fear. We are the problem solvers and the information seekers, when they don't know what to do or where to begin. We are the arms that hold them when it just becomes too much to bear. In those darkest moments, we are a glimmer of light, of hope, that reassures them that they will rebuild their lives.

In my nine years, I have responded to fires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, ice storms, and terrorist attacks. And while each disaster is different, they are also alike, for people in distress will always need what we can provide—food, shelter, clothing. But the memories I treasure most are not of the number of hotel rooms I've booked, or the socks I've given out. They are the memories of people, of individuals. The woman in the hospital whose bed I sat beside through the night after having to tell her of the loss of her beloved dogs. That night we cried together, held hands, and honored their lives. Together we mourned. It is the young mother who slumped in the chair in relief and exhaustion when a member of my team offered to hold her infant, knowing it was the cross we wear that made giving her only child to a stranger ok. And feeling humbled by that trust. It is the look on the old man's face when I was able to go back into what was left of the house he had lived in for 45 years and retrieve the picture of his wife, all he had left now. These are the moments that make getting up in the middle of a freezing night worthwhile.

We make a difference. It is as simple as that. And we can make a difference because of our history, because of our training, because of the trust the community has in us. That trust is why we wear this cross with pride. But you need to know that whatever I give I get back ten times over. My work with the Red Cross is my antidepressant. On 9/11, and the dark days that followed, we were all overwhelmed by the sheer evil that seemed to be engulfing the world. I was part of a team that went to the Pentagon to serve the first responders. Those brave men and women, many of whom were so very young, had thought they were simply responding to a fire. Soon they realized that they were there for the duration. They had only the clothes on their backs, dirty uniforms, and feet rubbed raw from wading through water as they fought the blaze and then searched for the missing. So we got them aspirins for their headaches, antihistamines to help with the smoke-induced breathing difficulties, bananas simply because they craved them, dry socks and medicated powder for their sore feet, and chocolates to put

under the pillows on the cots that we had made up for them. As the days wore on they came to us for a moment's escape and shared their stories of missed weddings, of missing their child's first birthday or first step, of the horror felt by the 18-year-old who had found a body amidst the charred ruins. Pentagon workers came to talk as they tried to digest the news that the person who had been at the desk beside them was dead, and wondering why they had survived. Yet they all stayed to help, never complaining. They were and are my heroes. There are people like this every time I go out on a call. These people and the wonderful individuals, with whom I work, remind me always that even in our darkest moments, this world is filled with people of incredible dedication and commitment, whose compassion and generosity of spirit can heal any wound.

These are the reasons I do what I do. This is what you do when you make your donation. You are there with us. When clients try to thank us, I simply say, "What we do is a gift from the American people". You are that gift. You make a difference.