SEPT 10, LOUISIANA: FROM BATON ROUGE TO THE FLOOD ZONE

BATON ROUGE, La. - Today started off like any other day.

Like others at the American Red Cross, I rose at 6 a.m. to the sound of cell phone alarm clocks. Some volunteers got coffee, I picked up a glass of orange juice, and we headed out in caravans of rental cars to our various jobs.

That's where the normalcy ended: My partner and I were given an order to deliver 24 pallets of bottled water (42,000 pounds) to Morero, La., in Jefferson Parish -- just a few miles south of New Orleans across the Mississippi River in an area that was damaged by the hurricane's high winds but spared the devastating floodwaters.

Our vehicle was a rented rig with a 53-foot trailer. I was to be the navigator because I'm no commercial truck driver -- and interestingly enough, my partner, 56-year-old Mike Keller, hasn't driven an 18-wheeler in 15 years.

Keller and I met in the main warehouse here in Baton Rouge. I was telling another volunteer my name and hometown when Mike overheard me say "San Luis Obispo" and gave me that weird look as though it sounded familiar. It turns out he's from Atascadero. It was great to find a friend from home.

Mike is a transportation engineering technician for Caltrans in San Luis. He's driven semi trucks for a few years, but the last time he drove a big rig was 1990. He acknowledged being a little rusty at first, even though he's kept his commercial driver's license.

I volunteered to help the Red Cross here doing whatever I could -- from photographing relief efforts to driving diesel trucks to resupplying shelters. Keller signed up for the Red Cross the day after he read an article about becoming a volunteer.

"I was watching the television on and off, and seeing the destruction made me remark that if I had a bass boat, I'd be going there right now to help some of these stranded people," he said.

Halfway through his Red Cross training class in San Luis Obispo, Keller called his boss and wife. Much to their surprise, he told them that he'd be leaving for the South in 24 to 48 hours.

Keller has been a great friend so far.

On the Road to Morero

Today's resupply run to Morero provided enough water to support the few hundred residents there who are slowly returning to town.

We received mixed looks, from a man on a bicycle giving me a thumbs-up to scowls from a few residents sitting on a bench. To say that we're unwelcome isn't correct, but to say that the mood here is peaceful isn't right either. The
people here seem scared and confused.

I watched a woman collecting bricks from her chimney, which had collapsed in her front yard and landed on her car. It was almost like a photograph. The image set in my mind while I processed everything that was going on in this woman's life at that very moment.


And last, the people, her community -- nowhere to be found.

The simple support structure that we rely on, from neighbors to city services, isn't here.

What is here? A lot of fallen bricks, thousands of trees littering the street, armed service people with assault rifles on every major street corner, and two men from San Luis Obispo County driving a tractor-trailer for the Red Cross to deliver a few thousand bottles of water.

I'm beginning to realize that my impact on this disaster is like that of a worker ant: It will take thousands of us carrying items that seem so big in our hands but are so small to a region that once was home to millions of people.

**Knee Deep in the French Quarter**

On our way back to Baton Rouge, we made a few wrong turns and found ourselves knee-deep in the French Quarter. I cannot comprehend what the people of this city went through.

I saw cars under water. I watched military Blackhawk helicopters descend to rescue stranded citizens. I cringed at the pervasive scent of death and sewage coming from the oil-black water. I watched rescue teams tag the sides of houses with paint as they searched for the living and dead.

We drove until the interstate went no further, and water lapped against the concrete like it was meant to be there. My jaw dropped at the sight of stop signs jutting just above the water.
Before I left San Luis Obispo, I heard a few guys saying things like, "If I were there, I would have gotten out way before Katrina touched down."

Judging from what I saw and have read, however, that view is far too simplistic.

When the floodwaters run for miles, as they do here, there is no escape. I can’t begin to feel what residents experienced, but I can see what they went through.

Today’s photographs can be found here: http://www.nickhoover.com/redcross/day4/

*Note: Media use is exclusive to the Tribune and Cal Poly’s public relations department; TV is out unless it relates to my effort as a Red Cross volunteer and Cal Poly student.

About Cal Poly Student Nick Hoover
I am a 22 year old Cal Poly Graphic Communication senior from Los Osos, CA. I also work part time as a photography desk tech/photojournalist at The Tribune. I decided to volunteer with the Red Cross on Thursday, September 1st. I was called into duty on Saturday, Sept. 3 and arrived on Monday, Sept. 6. I will be here for two weeks (until September 19th). My duties as a volunteer range from media relations, to handing food out to those in need. I’m not doing this for any praise, but simply to help out those can barely help themselves. The reason I’m sending this to multiple media sources, is I want to encourage volunteers to sign up with the Red Cross. Current needs are roughly 40,000 volunteers over the next three months. Without raising awareness, we will be short handed in a colossal effort to feed, shelter, and rebuild the gulf coast. By documenting my effort as a volunteer -- I hope that I can show people that making the decision to join is not a difficult one. With a few quick training classes, some basic orientation, almost anyone can come help out.