

# The Red Cross: Immersion Project

By Y. Hope Osborn

Most mornings, a shriek pierces my sleep, and I fumble to turn off the alarm. I drag myself out of bed and start my morning routine. Make the bed. Get dressed. Eat oatmeal and orange juice. Today is Sunday. A day at home. A few chores, and then time off from school work and a writing job. My cat and I spend most of the day resting in the quiet of our home. I feel safe and secure.

The wailing siren startles me. Southern Louisiana's bayous and mobsters and cops are suddenly just words in a book. The wail is a tornado warning.

But it doesn't look like I should be worried. The clouds are flat, pale grey, and quiet. There is no sign of rain. I don't bother to turn on the news. A movie before bedtime is more enticing. I feel safe and secure.

Thousands of Arkansans started their day the same way though weather forecasters predicted severe weather for much of the mid-South. Many Arkansans felt safe and secure.

But sirens wailed across the state of Arkansas that afternoon and into the night.

The radio broadcast startles me. Safety and security are suddenly just careless notions. The broadcast is the governor's speech.

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According to the National Weather Service, on April 27, 2014 just after 7pm, a few miles away from where I was watching a movie, a supercell rapidly intensified northwest of Little Rock and dropped a deadly EF4 rated tornado. It thrashed a ½ mile wide swath for 41 miles through the towns of Mayflower and Vilonia before dissipating near El Paso. An estimated 400 to 500 homes were destroyed. There were 16 fatalities reported, making it the deadliest single tornado in Arkansas since May 15, 1968.

The next morning, as I listen to the governor requesting and reporting on assistance being given to devastated areas, a passing comment captures my attention. The Red Cross is on the scene providing aid.

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We all go about our lives focused on wrapping up a project at work, preparing a meal at home, or visiting a friend at the coffee shop. Rainy days, fires, and shootings briefly capture our attention only if we watch the 6 o'clock news. We may pause in sadness for a moment, but the dryer buzzes or the dog whines to go out and the brief story and momentary sadness are lost.

Until sirens wail, warning of nearby tornadoes. Or smoke billows, threatening fire from a neighboring home. Or cancer spreads, creating platelet need in a close friend.

The red cross is a symbol we see in the background news image of a tent in the foreign land of Haiti after a hurricane. The Red Cross is something we text a donation to in response to a radio blurb of an earthquake on the other side of the country.

Until we become part of a news image or radio blurb. Then the grief is from our image of a blackened shell that we once called home. We haven't even thought about where to sleep tonight.

Then the red cross is a symbol you see on a van that drives up your street and parks in front of you.

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News outlets across the nation reported on the devastation and aftermath of the tornados both in Arkansas and neighboring states on April 27, 2014. A few passing words frequently noted the Red Cross's presence.

Before the night of April 27 was over, the Red Cross was driving up the streets of Vilonia and Mayflower in front of people that may have been you and could have been me.

In response to the disaster, the Red Cross:

“Communicated with Emergency Management, deployed team members, opened shelters, supported others and provided assistance to residents affected by the storm as needed. More than 200 people spent Sunday night [the night of the storm] in shelters in Arkansas that were opened or supported by Red Cross workers” (Disaster Update).

Twelve days ago countless people lost their lives to death or to destruction. Those living with the destruction continue and will continue for some time to pick up the pieces. Today, offering shelter, food, supplies, medical attention, counseling, and direction, the Red Cross is still there helping them to pick up the pieces.

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The Red Cross is known for its response to large-scale disasters around the world, from the devastating 2005 Hurricane Katrina of the American Gulf Coast to the deadly 2010 earthquake of Haiti. Many people are not aware of the wide-spread disaster that devastates the U.S. The American Red Cross responds to about 70,000 natural and man-made disasters in the U.S. each year. House fires alone account for a Red Cross response every 80 seconds.

Disaster is a California earthquake that disrupts communication and limits the water supply in your city. Disaster is an Arkansas tornado that cuts a swathe through your neighborhood. Disaster is an electrical short that burns down your home. Disaster is also the cancer calling for chemotherapy that kills your blood's protective platelets. Disaster is the people suffering these disasters.

These disasters aren't often reported because they seem unrelated to your average individual—until it is you. The Red Cross's mobile teams often go unnoticed—until they pull up to your own family home. The attention a fire the magnitude of the combined fires of the nation in a year would get is unrelated to the lack of attention one individual fire would get, but it is at all these individual fires that Red Cross volunteers show up to find a means for people to live for a few days through the generous support of local businesses, organizations, and individuals.

It is that generous support of and partnership with businesses and organizations and individuals that the non-profit American Red Cross depends upon to provide food, shelter, counseling, medical treatment, blood products, and other help of every shape and kind to alleviate people's suffering.

But donations of funds, blood product, or other provisions aren't enough without the Red Cross's most critical resource. People. The American Red Cross is dependent on people who are strangers to you and dependent on people who are your friends, and it is dependent on you. People are needed for regularly supplying money and blood products, and people are needed to train for regularly showing up at a moment's notice at a fire at an apartment complex. People are needed to greet and check-in blood donors at the Lowry Blood Center in Little Rock, Arkansas and people were needed to counsel survivors at the theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado. People are number one of all the resources utilized by the Red Cross in its mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

The American Red Cross is people caring for people.

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The American Red Cross began with one person caring. Nurse Claire Barton was touring Europe after the Civil War of the United States when she heard about the Swiss-inspired global Red Cross. Upon returning home she campaigned for an American Red Cross. It was established in Washington, D.C. on May 21, 1881. For the next 23 years, Barton grew the American Red Cross's tradition by campaigning for the ratification of the Geneva Convention protecting the war-injured and for peacetime relief work as part of the American Red Cross's inclusion with the global Red Cross network. During her time, United States soldiers in the Spanish-American War and victims of disasters at home and abroad were helped.

The First World War exponentially grew the American Red Cross in membership, chapters, and fund contribution and in its efforts in staffing hospitals and recruiting nurses and aiding American soldiers and refugees. The Second World War brought into being the American Red Cross's national blood program, initially created to help wounded soldiers. In between those wars and after, the American Red Cross helped soldiers in other wars such as Vietnam and Korea, initiated programs that would develop into Health and Safety Training & Education and a civilian blood program, and provided disaster relief in the midst of the Mississippi River floods in 1927 and severe drought and the Depression during the 1930s.

133 years after Nurse Barton founded the American Red Cross, dedicated staff, volunteers, and donors continue the compassionate care she started.

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Jangling like that of an old-fashioned telephone prompts me to answer my cell phone. I glance at the glowing display and see it is Karen. Karen pleasantly greets me when I answer the phone. She asks me if I will schedule a time to donate platelets. I am well and rested, so I make an appointment.

Karen is an Apheresis Recruiter with the Mid-America Blood Services Division of American Red Cross, and she is calling from her desk at the Greater Ozark Region Lowery Blood Center in Little Rock, Arkansas. In fact, every day she calls a great number of people asking them to give a little of themselves by donating platelets through a special process called apheresis that allows you to safely give blood or one of its components in large amounts.

Karen later reminds me that platelets are one of four components that make up blood. Red cells, white cells, and plasma are the other three components. Platelets keep us from bleeding excessively, clotting at the site of wounds. Eradicating cancer in patients also eradicates platelets, so part of treating someone for cancer includes replenishing

their platelets. Each replenishment calls for two to four units of platelets. American Red Cross blood centers accept and process blood platelets from donors that are then supplied to hospitals to treat patients.

Patients, Karen tells me, like Maddie Windle who has cancer. Being treated at Arkansas Children's Hospital for her third reoccurrence of cancer, eleven-year old Maddie needs five units of red blood cells and three units of platelets a week. Some of the people Karen calls request to donate specifically to Maddie, and with a little organization, specialists who handle the donation process accommodate.

I ask Karen how she came to work this position.

"I guess I was at the right place at the right time," she tells me.

She was working part-time at a tobacco shop and her manager's wife said they had created a new position at the Red Cross "to make it more personable for the donors, someone they could get used to seeing every time. Just to make it, you know, a calm atmosphere," Karen unconsciously describes herself and her job.

"Nope," is her response to my question as to whether or not she had any prior experience with the Red Cross. All she knew was "that they helped people, you know, as far as disaster. I didn't know that much about the blood services side."

I ask Karen, now that she is more familiar, what she thinks is one of the best things about the Red Cross.

"They help save lives. And since I've worked in here I've gotten to know a lot of the donors. We have donors who come in and donate for their own surgeries. We have donors who come in and donate for family members who are sick. They need blood, and they need platelets. You get to hear some of the stories and get to be part of their family also. So that's the rewarding part of my job. If they let me, I would work here seven days a week. I love my donors and I love my job."

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Donating platelets at the Lowery Center to help the multitude of people with conditions such as cancer involves a caring spirit and a couple of hours of your time every couple of weeks, if you donate as frequently as your body safely will allow. Some days I am a donor.

It is as simple for me as driving down quiet Monroe St. to the square reddish-tan brick building, parking in one of the many available spaces designated with reserved donor

signs, and walking through the expansive red-framed sliding glass doors into the Lowery Blood Center. To the right are a couple of metal, red-framed doors indicating where to enter and exit. Once in, Sandy or a volunteer helps me check in on a small laptop on which I confirm my name, contact information, and appointment. I am asked to read from a flat blue binder about various things I need to know as a donor and about various conditions and medications that keep me from giving. These details are important for my safety and for the safety of the recipient of the platelets.

As I wait my turn, my gaze takes in the green top hats hanging from the ceiling, pots of gold depicted on green pennant banners draped against the walls, and a green paper shamrock sitting on a table with individual-sized bags of cookies and crackers and a platter of chocolate-chip and sugar sprinkled cookies. Depending on when I am at the Center, I see hanging red and white hearts, draped and twisted red and green crepe paper, or standing brown, red, and gold paper turkeys. I know that the seasonal decorations are just the first impression of the warm and gracious people who appreciatively aid in my donation process.

After usually a short while, Jason, one of a number of those warm and gracious specialists, beckons me to follow him to one of several small enclosed rooms to privately answer a series of questions regarding my health and the conditions I already read about and to provide a pin prick of blood, my temperature, and blood pressure to confirm that I am well enough to give.

Jason has earned the credentials and the respect of a supervisory position, has been with the Red Cross for fourteen and a half years, and has additional prior experience working at a plasma center. I ask him how he came to be a part of the Red Cross, and he describes his own first blood product donation,

“They came to my high school, and I thought it was the right thing to do.”

Jason’s personal stake also include a niece who needed blood products as she battled cancer and both parents who were regular donors.

Once Jason deems me healthy, I put my feet up and lean back in a chair next to electronic medical equipment that undertakes, with a specialist’s supervision, the apheresis process. The needle is smoothly inserted in my arm and the rest is left to Jason who works over the equipment that includes hanging medical bags and tubes and electronic settings, equipment that removes platelets and returns the remaining components back to me along with a little saline.

Jason tells me the job has its hardships.

“The long hours. The number of donors we see some days ... The center is open 365 days a year. It is kind of like working in a hospital. You know, someone has to be here.”

Despite being constantly on his feet with a rigorous work schedule, Jason remains on his feet off-hours too, managing to have an active and healthy lifestyle that includes hunting, fishing, golfing, and riding motorcycles.

To pass the time of the donation process, I am offered a choice from the vast selection of popular movies. A portable DVD player with headphones is set up on a pillow on my lap. As I watch Bruce Willis and Morgan Freeman kick butt in *Red* or Nicholas Cage hunt for historic and elusive treasure in *National Treasure*, the only thought I give to the donation process is intermittently squeezing a soft rubber ball in the hand of the needled arm to keep everything flowing smoothly and by considering if I feel alright. If I get cold, I am covered in warm blankets. If I get tingly around the mouth or nauseous, I am given Tums for the calcium.

Afterwards my needled arm is wrapped in a bright red compression bandage to staunch the flow of blood, I am graciously thanked, and I am encouraged to help my body replenish what has been lost by drinking plenty of fluids and getting something to eat, starting with the cookies, crackers, chocolate milk, sodas, water, and juice I am offered as I rest at the refreshments table. Sandy or a volunteer who greeted me at the start of this process is also there to make sure I don't feel any aftereffects, such as lightheadedness or nausea. As I push through the exit door, I notice that I am very naturally tired. But I am a good kind of tired that comes from giving of myself.

Jason's response to my last question makes me think he knows this kind of tired at the end of a long day. What he likes best about being with the Red Cross is

“Getting to help people.”

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The slight, square office is made closer by stacks of brown packing boxes and papers, files, and assorted items indistinguishable in the low lighting afforded by a row of unadorned windows across one wall. Brigitte Williams, who tells me she has not unpacked since she moved in two years ago, sits at her desk, pleasantly giving me an interview, despite her busy schedule. Her schedule has made this meeting a long time in coming and, even now, occasionally interrupts our conversation through her office phone's ringing, cell phone's bleeping, and e-mail's chiming.

The low lighting is due in part to dark, thundery clouds that Central Arkansas has been warned could result in a dangerous storm. The storm is part of what divides Brigette's attention. Her job as Communication Information Officer of the American Red Cross includes keeping communication flowing so that the community is informed of crisis situations and what the needs are and so that individuals in the community are prepared beforehand for crisis. A crisis could be house fires from lightning strikes, prolonged power outages, or flooding from sudden downpours. Her "office" time is divided among here, area disaster sites, and fund-raising locations.

When she begins sharing a fund-raising experience that inspires her, Brigette hesitates, shyly dropping her eyes as she tells me, "Hopefully, I won't cry about it because I always do."

"Kids are just incredible," she declares. At a fund-raising, she looked into the querulous faces of 4-yr olds at Woodrow Elementary School of Little Rock and explained what "their money was going to do." Mindful of their innocence, she told them about people in a place called Haiti who had been hurt by a hurricane. The money would give shots to kids. Brigette was not surprised by the dismay of her young audience.

"Remember, your parents get to take you and get you vaccinated all the time and so you're protected from most things. And you don't have to worry about that and your parents don't have to worry about that, but you're helping keep the kids of Haiti safe and keep them well."

Brigette remembers with "awe" the looks on those kids' faces as she saw them "Get it. Even that young."

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I am volunteering at the Lowery Blood Center when he comes to stand in front of my desk. His words and rough appearance begin his story. As for every other person whom I have greeted, I ask him to check in on the laptop.

"I don't work on computers. I do manual labor."

As I help him check-in and he waits to donate, I notice the sun-darkened and rugged skin of his face, protected by a worn red baseball cap that is not a fashion statement but a necessity of his rugged work. The clothes on his short, barrel-shaped form show wear and dirt, speaking of hard, rough work. He tells me that he came straight here from his shift at the airport UPS. He is starting his day-off donating blood, and he is looking forward to going home to watch the race-car driving he enjoys so much. I was curious as

to why he would spend the time and energy and depart from hard-won rest at home to donate blood at this moment.

“I don’t want to see anyone die. I got plenty of blood. It’s still red. I guess that’s good.”

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He is one of the millions of donors who give millions of units of blood products nationwide each year, saving countless lives. With donors’ help, the Red Cross collects and processes over 40% of the blood supply that is distributed to 3,000 hospitals and transfusion centers nationwide. That collection process starts with manual laborers, high school students, retirees, and Jason at the Lowery Blood Center and continues through testing, storing, and distributing foremost to local hospitals and furthermore to wherever there is a particular patient need.

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I glance out my apartment’s glass patio doors and see dark, angry clouds hurriedly billowing by just over the top of the buildings of my apartment complex. It is late January, and though the weather in Arkansas has been expressing extremes of temperature and therefore weather, it is strange to see such violent and alarming thunderstorm clouds. I step outside and am surprised that the clouds are not of moisture but of smoke, and they are coming from somewhere very close. Across the complex parking lot, an apartment building is a roaring blaze of intensely heated flames! Despite the heroic efforts of the firemen on scene, the sky-reaching, water-resistant flames are a very real danger to the whole complex!

If my building burns, I think, “Where will I go with such short notice with the very few funds I possess? How will I be able to continue on with life without all the large and small elements that I own that help with that life? It is evident, even to me, that the building engulfed in flames is a complete loss. What are those dwellers thinking that moment?

Where will I sleep tonight?

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Her spry gait and smooth, dark skin belied the age her silver-lined bun of hair suggested. When she had checked in for her appointment to donate blood, she sits down at the refreshments table where I am, and we begin to talk. I am curious about why she might be in today to donate blood. I have had a variety of answers, but none as surprising as hers.

She is there simply because someone with the Red Cross she had met the previous week had asked her to be. The surprising part of her answer is that she met this Red Cross representative at the site of an apartment fire--her own apartment fire. Her fire was at a different apartment complex, but she had some of the same questions I imagined earlier.

I thought about my questions--If my apartment burned, where will I go ... Where will I sleep tonight ... What will I have to start over ...? as she tells me of how Red Cross volunteers had asked her if she had a place to stay for the night, ready to provide a spot in one of the many churches and businesses the Red Cross requests or is offered. She was given a few toiletries such as toothpaste and toothbrush, and she was told she would be given a debit card if she would just stop by The Lowry Blood Center to pick it up. So there she is, stopping by to pick up a \$50 debit card, and she thought it handy, only days after her home burned down, to donate blood while she is there.

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While I had worried about the flames engulfing an apartment building near mine, someone, many someones, in fact, had already thought about this moment of flame and its victims, even before the fire was ignited. It is for just such times of disaster that the people of the American Red Cross are constantly preparing, and this readiness meant that while the firemen were working to control and extinguish the blaze, trained Red Cross volunteers were also on site, working a canteen for the firemen and making sure the displaced residents have a place to sleep that night.

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The number of people caring for people every day with the American Red Cross is endless. James faithfully makes sure all the centers throughout Arkansas and Springfield, MO are continually stocked with all the fresh supplies such as needles, and tubes, and blood product bags, and gauze, and so much more that are so necessary for blood product services. Marci, Biomedical Services Communicator for the Greater Ozark Region, enthusiastically gives me a run down on what Red Cross Biomedical Services is about. Marci spends a good deal of time talking to organizations and educating the public about the Red Cross, making people aware so they continue to support. Disaster responders assist victims of the Out in the Woods apartment building fire in Little Rock, Arkansas.

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Through people like Jason, Brigitte, Karen, Marci, and countless unnamed the American Red Cross is in Little Rock, Arkansas, taking blood donations at the Lowry Blood Center for cancer-patient Maddie Windle and helping residents at my own complex on the day their homes burned to the ground; in New Orleans, Louisiana, offering aid when the levees burst because of Hurricane Katrina; in Aurora, Colorado, providing counselors after the shooting at the midnight screening of the film *The Dark Knight Rises*; and at every American military outpost in the world, supporting our soldiers and their families.

Because of its staff, donors, partners, and volunteers, the American Red Cross is at places like these across the U.S. 70,000 times a year.

One of those times was April 27, 2014 when across Arkansas sirens wailed.

Disaster may touch me, but I am safe and secure with the knowledge that the Red Cross is waiting to provide aid.

**Works Cited**

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