

'They are their brothers' keepers'

Retired Bridgeport firefighter leads vigil in memory of hurricane victims

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Craig Kelly, former Bridgeport Firefighter blows out his candle in the foyer of the Bridgeport Library where a small candle light vigil was held after he spoke of his time counseling Hurricane Katrina survivors on a cruise ship for a total of seven months. (Johnathon Henninger/Connecticut Post)

BRIDGEPORT - A small, but heartfelt group of people gathered in the vestibule of the Burroughs and Saden Memorial Library Tuesday for a candlelight vigil in tribute to victims of Hurricane Katrina on the first anniversary of that powerful storm.

Retired Bridgeport Fire Lt. Craig Kelly led the group of seven people in The Lord's Prayer and offered a moment of silence in honor of those killed and displaced by the hurricane that hit the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005.

"Pray that those left homeless will be in a better situation," Kelly said, before reminding those present they are their brothers' keepers.

"In life, we often say, 'Oh, it's somebody else,' whether it's Katrina or drug problems or poor schools, until it affects us personally. Help us to eradicate that mentality. It is our problem," he said.

Kelly witnessed the devastation first hand in the seven months he spent in New Orleans counseling first responders and others affected by the widespread devastation. He was there under the auspices of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"We had a true gumbo of people working on our team, a diverse group of Japanese, African-American, Hispanic, Mexican, Puerto Rican; we had everybody," he said.

Kelly said his experience counseling widows of fire and police personnel killed in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, gave him "an understanding of

dealing with people in trauma because they fluctuate from day to day."

After 9-11, he said some people in New York would simply hear fire engines and would start to cry. "In New Orleans, when it started raining people would cry," he said.

Dealing with people from a disaster, a counselor must be a sponge. "Listen, then try to move them into a direction where they can help themselves. It's not about giving them answers and solutions to their problems," Kelly said.

Before the vigil, Kelly recounted for the group in an hourlong presentation at the library his experiences in New Orleans and showed them about 200 of his photographs.

"Just listening to it, there are no words to describe. To this day people are not made whole. They still don't have their homes. There are families still displaced. I felt I needed to be here. Those people are still suffering," said Denise Holley, of Bridgeport.

Holley was moved by photos of vehicles crushed under houses and neighborhoods devoid of homes or any signs of life.

"I considered it a rare opportunity to hear from someone who was actually there," said Assistant City Librarian Ann Osbon.

Osbon said she was impressed to learn Kelly helped establish a peer counseling group and Motown music presentations on the two cruise ships housing 5,000 victims.

"Adults didn't have activities or any release. What better way than music and dance to get you away from immediate circumstances," Osbon said. The group was also surprised to learn Kelly almost got caught in the storm.

Kelly was in New Orleans for a college fraternity reunion, and, in fact, had stopped in Mayor Ray Nagin's office to drop off a copy of a documentary he produced on 9-11, taking from the office a copy of the "Louisiana Citizen Awareness and Disaster Evacuation Guide." On its cover was a large photograph of the eye of a storm.

It was the eve of Hurricane Katrina's disastrous visit.

But Kelly knew nothing of the impending storm. "I wasn't watching the Weather Channel down there." He had actually tried to change his flight schedule to stay in New Orleans but couldn't get through.

"God is sometimes giving you a warning signal," Kelly said.

He got home to Bridgeport safely. "I watched this whole process unfold on TV. I got on my knees and cried for the people down there," Kelly said.

On his return to help with relief efforts, Kelly said, "When I first landed in New Orleans what I remember is the stench. I've had the opportunity to travel to eight

African countries where there was a problem with sewage. It was like I was in a Third World country," Kelly said.

Although he often worked 18-hour days, Kelly said, "I am blessed to have been able to provide a level of hope and move them away from a level of despair.

"I would do it again," Kelly said.