

## 'Not Forgotten': California woman wants to sustain help for Jersey Shore, other disaster areas

charlene-marie-king-not-forgotten.JPG

Charlene Marie King -- who founded the Not Forgotten Project in California -- recently arrived on the Jersey Shore to volunteer for a six weeks helping Coastal Habitat and other organizations rebuild after Sandy. *(David Gard/For The Star-Ledger)*

**Erin O'Neill/The Star-Ledger** By **Erin O'Neill/The Star-Ledger**

**Email the author | Follow on Twitter**

on August 25, 2013 at 7:30 AM, updated August 25, 2013 at 7:36 AM

**MANASQUAN** —After a natural disaster pummels a region, Charlene Marie King wants to go there to help, and when national attention eventually turns away from that area, King wants to keep coming back, with friends in tow.

That's why this summer marked the 19th time she visited the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina.

That's why she's traveled to the towns of Joplin, Mo.; Tuscaloosa, Ala.; and Moore, Okla., which were all devastated by tornadoes.

And that's why she's now in New Jersey, 10 months after Hurricane Sandy.

As she stood in a storm-damaged home in Manasquan that she's working on with Coastal Habitat for Humanity, King said she wants people "to keep coming, to continue coming once people have moved on. Because I did run into some people in Oklahoma who had originally planned on being here but then Oklahoma happened. That's going to happen to Oklahoma, too. When the next thing happens, people are going to move on from there and they are going to need more help for a long time also."

King, a 47-year-old from Pomona, Calif., only takes part-time work in order to allow her to spend weeks at a time away from home, paying her own way to volunteer with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Church of Christ and Samaritan's Purse. This summer King — who has started a group called the Not Forgotten Project aimed at recruiting volunteers to assist with ongoing recovery efforts — spent time in Oklahoma and Mississippi before arriving in New Jersey for a six-week stay.

"My goal is to get here 19 times in the next seven years," she said, or even "get here more frequently than that and plus send volunteers even when I'm not here."

Friends, as well as California-based the Sash Co., helped pay for her flights on this trip. King said she would like to volunteer more often, but "it really does cost a lot of money to go help people."

Still, she said she feels the need to volunteer.

King started working with Habitat for Humanity of the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the summer of 2006 on her first visit to the area after Katrina. During that trip, she also worked with a local Boys & Girls Club.

That's where she met Honey LeBlanc, who was then a seventh-grade English teacher at Pass Christian public schools.

LeBlanc, who is now a high school math teacher, said King helped restore a sense of normalcy in the youth group at a time when "everybody was just walking around like a war zone."

After that first trip, King kept coming back.

"I got back September 2 of 2006 from my first trip and took a temp job and went back in November. Then went back in December and then back in March and then back in July," said King.

"Most of the volunteers quit coming because things started to get a little bit better, but Charlene just kept coming," said LeBlanc, who King now stays with when volunteering in the area. "A lot of people were sending prayer, donating canned goods, but Charlene comes and consistently donates effort. That's hard to come by."

Mark Vanaman, a construction supervisor for Habitat for Humanity of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, called King a "blessing."

"We've done Sheetrock together, siding, painting. We've done a little plumbing, a lot of building, a lot of construction," he said. "There's no project or task I would hesitate to put her on."

But King doesn't usually come alone when she visits.

Adele Lyons, the director of development with Habitat for Humanity of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, said King quickly bonded with other volunteers on job sites and "when she said, 'Hey, I'm coming back,' the same people came back with her."

King — who is staying at the Monmouth Church of Christ in Tinton Falls and working with Coastal Habitat for Humanity and Gateway Church of Christ along the Raritan Bay during her New Jersey stay — brought a group from Michigan to New Jersey to help earlier this month.

Debra McKinley, a leader of the Women Build for the Macomb County Habitat for Humanity in Michigan, said King "really pulls people that she's met over the builds."

"I just hook up with Charlene when I know she's going to be somewhere," said McKinley, a manager at a biotech company who met King while volunteering on the Gulf Coast.

In New Jersey — as in other areas that have suffered from natural disasters — such volunteer labor is a critical component of the rebuilding effort.

"We couldn't do what we do if we didn't have volunteers," said Maureen Mulligan, the executive director of Coastal Habitat for Humanity. "We absolutely are reliant on them to be here."

And King hopes to continue to contribute in New Jersey as long as the effort is needed.

"It's going to take awhile here," she said. But "if we all work together it won't take as long for people to get their lives back together."

## RELATED COVERAGE

- **As Coastal Habitat for Humanity's workload swells, so too does its volunteer legion**
- **The People's Pantry offers immediate relief, long-term recovery help for Sandy victims**

**FOLLOW THE STAR-LEDGER: [TWITTER](#) | [FACEBOOK](#)**