

# Bringing a River of Hope



by Beth Schoeppler

*“I’ll come back and I’ll bring help...”*

When Pastor Warren Jones heard Rebecca Thomley say these words outside his New Salem Baptist Church in New Orleans’ Upper Ninth Ward last October, he had plenty of reason to doubt her. It felt as if his neighborhood was almost as littered with broken promises as it was with the debris from Hurricane Katrina and the resulting levee breaches that put the area under water on August 29. But Thomley kept her promise, returning with friends, colleagues and family and truckloads of building materials and supplies at Thanksgiving, over the Martin Luther King Holiday, and again in March. In fact, River of Hope, the group she now spearheads, has plans to keep returning for as long as there’s a need for labor, materials and support.

## Promises Broken

Thomley is a practicing clinical psychologist in Minneapolis and President & CEO of Orion Associates and its five affiliated agencies (Meridian Services, Zenith Services, Orion ISO, Morningstar Financial Services, and Prospect Services) all of which serve individuals with disabilities and the elderly. She and her mother, Marya Hage, who founded the Orion agencies, are long-time Red Cross mental health volunteers. Together, and separately, they have been witnesses to and a comforting presence after such devastating events as the 9/11 plane crash at the Pentagon, Oklahoma City bombing and numerous natural disasters. Last October, Thomley’s Red Cross commitment brought her to New Orleans where she was assigned to provide whatever emotional support she could to families returning to see their homes and neighborhoods for the very first time since the flood.

“It’s really about being a presence, a witness. You can’t really provide therapy in the midst of such tragedies; you need to just be with them and offer support.” Thomley describes her initial trip to the hurricane torn, broken levee flooded region as unlike all of her other Red Cross assignments. “With every other disaster I’ve been assigned to, you could see the support systems

coming in and starting the process of recovery. This was different.”

Her assignments began at the airport – a check point that returning families would pass through before they entered the city. She’d walk up and down the line of cars, stopping to talk or simply hold a hand as people broke down under the weight and confusion of their losses. That’s where she met Larry Hauck. In a lilting New Orleans accent, Hauck tells it, “I was despondent. I wasn’t working, had no income. The hurricane had come through and damaged my house. Then they discovered that I had termites eating away at the structure. I knew I was lucky my house wasn’t affected by the broken levees, but it was still overwhelming. She helped me through my darkest day.” Little did he know that his brief encounter with Thomley was the beginning of a much longer, deeper relationship. But he touched something in her heart.

Marya Hage, who’d spent three weeks after the storm working from the Red Cross headquarters in Baton Rouge was back in Minnesota helping Thomley’s husband care for their twin nine-year-old sons. Thomley called home every night. In private conversations with her mother, she shared her feelings of desperation – of her need to do more. Hage recalls, “I told her, get a few names of people who we might be able to help. Maybe we can do something.” Larry Hauck’s was just one of the names Rebecca collected.

Near the end of her two week assignment, Thomley was sent to the Ninth Ward just as the first families were being allowed in. She walked the ravaged streets, hoping she could help in some way as the few families present stepped into the ruins of their homes. During her final few days, she encountered Pastor Jones. He’d been begging FEMA, the Red Cross, anyone and everyone he could find to come to his upper Ninth Ward neighborhood with help. Finally, someone at the Red Cross responded, and Thomley was sent to accompany a food truck. It was *eight* weeks after the levee broke and this was the very first relief assistance Pastor Jones’ neighborhood had seen.

Thrilled to have help, Pastor Jones encouraged Thomley and her Red Cross colleague to park the “ERV” – emergency

response vehicle – on the church parking lot. For Thomley, it seemed that Pastor Jones was the only life – human or otherwise – in the area. But as the day progressed, people appeared out of nowhere to get water and food. As she listened to people’s stories and distributed the food rations she had to offer, Thomley was aware of Pastor Jones. She could see that he was in shock, yet he was desperately trying to provide the leadership and strength his parish needed from him. A large, soft-spoken man, she could see the weight of his community’s losses bearing down on his shoulders. His passion, compassion and vulnerability touched Thomley. So when she had to leave, she made her promise, “I’ll come back. And, I’ll bring help.”

### **Promises Kept**

It was nearly the end of October and the team who lead the Orion agencies had replaced the business talk that usually formed the agenda of their officer’s discussions with Thomley’s account of her experiences in New Orleans. She told them about Larry and about Frank Fortenberry, the aging doorman at her hotel who had lost everything and didn’t have money for his heart medicine. She told them about Pastor Jones and the wrenching stories of the folks who received food packets in the church parking lot, faces full of pain and uncertainty. She told them of not wanting to leave, feeling like the people of the Ninth Ward and surrounding areas had simply been abandoned. Then she told

them of her promise. She remembers, “I wanted to go back soon, bring people, and supplies, make a difference. I needed to show these people that someone cares.”

Over her first days back in Minnesota she’d decided that Thanksgiving would be a perfect time to return to Ninth Ward. The extended weekend was coming fast. But what a great way to celebrate – sharing the abundance we take for granted with people who have such a great need. Her exhausted mind was energized by the idea: get a truck filled with supplies, get as many hands as could be mustered, and go clean up houses for the elderly people in Pastor Jones’ congregation who had no hope of being able to do it themselves.

Toni Thulen, Orion’s CFO, says “I thought it would be great *if* we could pull it off. But frankly, I didn’t know if it was possible. I didn’t know how we’d get enough supplies to fill a truck and I was skeptical that we could get people on staff to go down on such short notice.”

Thomley laughs when she recalls a conversation with Cheryl Vennerstrom, COO, who told her, “You are the CEO. You have the power to do this. You can just decide.” And decide, she did.

At a management meeting on November 1, she told the staff about her time in New Orleans, about her desire to help and about her plan. The company would pay the way of anyone who was willing to go help. They would all chip in on organizing, fund raising, pulling the logistics together. She told them, “If we all believe in it, it will happen.” By the end of the meeting she already had more than 20 staff members who had committed to leaving the day after Thanksgiving and spending several days on the ground in the Ninth ward.

Sarah Olsen, now a case aid, couldn’t be at that meeting because she had to stay back and answer phones. When Thomley called to invite her personally, her response was immediate.

“For sure! I’ll go. And I’ll do anything you want me to do to help.” Olsen says, “The next thing I know there’s a 48 foot truck in the parking lot. We had no idea how we were going to fill it.” But in the “just do it” style that has become their hallmark, the staff contacted friends, family, vendors. They put a sign on the truck’s side that could be seen from nearby highway 169. Soon, supplies were arriving and the truck was slowly filling.

Olsen reports, “We learned a lot. We had no experience fund raising. But we

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did it. We learned how to stack a palette. We learned how to operate a pallet jack. One night someone arrived with a refrigerator. There were only a few of us left at the office – five women in office clothes and high heels. You wouldn’t think it was possible, but we five lifted that refrigerator onto the semi-truck – high heels and all.”

On the 23rd of November, the 48 foot semi full of cleaning supplies, personal items, clothing, food and building materials took off for New Orleans. Most of the staff enjoyed Thanksgiving with their families before boarding the plane to New Orleans with the idea that they would be spending the weekend doing some heavy-duty housecleaning.

As the plane began its landing, members of the staff were eager to see what they could from the air. As far as they could observe they saw what seemed like tents, but it was the infamous blue tarps over roof after roof in the miles of devastation. Jen Van Rooy, a program administrator, describes their arrival as “...spooky. We were the only plane at the



entire airport.” They rented vans, and headed out on the deserted highways to make their way to the New Salem Baptist Church where they’d meet up with the semi-truck. While they saw little other traffic, they were taken aback by the abandoned cars lining underpasses, almost strewn along the roadside. As they drove over the bridge to the Upper Ninth it hit them: the incredible, overwhelming smell of death.

It was late afternoon, with the sun already starting its descent when the River of Hope group pulled up in Pastor Jones’ parking lot. As they started piling out of the five mini-vans, he admits to having a moment of doubt. Yes, here were 35 willing people... but 33 women ranging from age 21 to 67? One of the two guys in the group was a teenager. Jones knew they had no idea what they were in for. He confesses his conversation with God at the moment was none too grateful, “Lord, *what* did you send? Don’t I already have a heavy enough burden?”

Dark – an impossibly deep dark due to the absence of electricity – was on its way and the truck needed to be unloaded, but there was no dry place to put everything. Jones had a key to the dry cleaning store across the street, so they stepped inside to see if it would work for storage. This was the River of Hope crew’s first inkling of what their weekend might really be about. It wasn’t going to be about mops and sponges and bleach, it was going to be about wheelbarrows, shovels and crowbars. Without hesitation the group began clearing out the place, taking it to its bare bones. Working with miners’ lights on their heads and flood lights connected to their vehicles’ batteries, they saw their way to emptying the building and then unloading the contents of the semi-trailer. By 9pm they were done, ready to collapse for a brief rest before the real work started.

### “Salvage what you can”

Each day of that first long weekend, the group would leave their hotel at 7:30 and drive to the church where they’d meet up and get the day’s assignments. One group would work on a daycare/after school center and the rest were assigned to the houses of elderly people who had no resources or family to depend on for help.

Imagine muddy, industrial pollution-filled waters rising inside a house. The items left on the floor float up, then the furniture. Clothing drifts out of closets, water seeps into the drawers, the cupboards, the refrigerator. The house and all its contents sit filled with these murky waters for more than a week and then the slow drainage begins. It leaves behind soaked, filthy, fetid upheaval. Next the warmth comes – not to dry these drenched possessions, floors and walls – but to encourage the rampant bacteria’s growth. The only visible life remaining is a dark green display of fungus and the maggots that infest the now month’s old sodden and rotting food.

“We were told to salvage any thing we could,” Olsen recalls, “I looked around and thought, ‘there’s no way we can save anything.’ Unless it was made of hard, non-porous material, it was ruined.”

For most of the houses it took an entire day for a team of five to empty the contents onto the street for the garbage trucks to pick up. The group wasn’t entirely sure that trucks would even be coming – as there were piles everywhere – but they knew they had no choice. They couldn’t begin to gut them until they’d been emptied of all their furnishings, all their worldly goods.

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With only a couple wheelbarrows shared between the teams, the task of emptying and gutting the houses became an exercise in creativity. Thulén stresses the point, “We filled flower pots with



stuff to carry it out, clothes baskets, any container we could find. At one house, the landscaping fabric had come loose in the yard. We brought it inside and then used it to drag a huge load of stuff out.”

When they took a minute to notice, the workers were struck by the eeriness of their setting. In this neighborhood there were no residents, no traffic, no birds, not even bugs...just the police, Pastor Jones and them. “Where are we?” was a common, though unspoken response. It hardly seemed possible this was an earthly place, let alone a part of the richest country on earth. It was as if the upper Ninth Ward was a desolate, desperate world unto itself. That feeling was reinforced for Olsen when Pastor Jones stopped by to observe their work one afternoon. He had just taken a parishioner back to her house for the first time, and they’d discovered the body of the woman’s brother-in-law. It was the Monday after Thanksgiving – three full months after Katrina hit.



Each night, the group would reconvene at the church, then head back to the hotel in a caravan of mini-vans. The Hotel Monteleone was housing nearly 100 of its own employees who had lost everything in the flood. As the River of Hope volunteers would squish their way through the elegant lobby, cringing at the muck and odor that covered and accompanied them, they were greeted with warm smiles and a trail of murmured thank yous. The filth they absorbed was so bad that the volunteers had no choice but to toss their work clothes in plastic bags and set them outside their hotel room doors for

garbage collection – just more Katrina debris beyond salvage.

Four days, a gutted church, daycare center, and six houses later, the last group of twelve was getting set to leave New Orleans to return to their dry, comfortable homes in Minneapolis. Like those who had left on earlier flights, they were overwhelmed with sadness. It seemed to them they done so little compared to the need. That morning, Pastor Jones took them on a tour of a few other neighborhoods as they bided the little time left before they had to be at the airport. As they drove through one last area, he pointed to a house and said, that’s where I live. So consumed by helping others, he had not yet returned to his own home.

To his surprise, the group pulled their vans in front. Together they walked through this great man’s study, a library of books ruined and gone. His furniture, the fixtures, everything lost. It was more than Pastor Jones could take. The group stayed and helped clear out what they could – nearly completing the gutting it required before it was time to go. Pastor’s shoulders slumped, and the tears streamed as his gratitude was mixed with overwhelming sorrow. It had taken just a few hours to remove everything he’d owned. To be sure, the next day he’d be the pillar, the solid rock in the Upper Ninth again, but for this moment, he too was victim of Katrina’s wrath and the failings of humans.

### **A Beacon of Hope**

The River of Hope continues to fulfill Thomley’s promise to this man so many have come to admire and adore. And so they keep going back at every opportunity: over the Martin Luther King holiday, at “spring break” time in March. Another trip is in the works for June with more to follow. With each trip they bring a truck full of supplies to replenish a Community Resource Center and tool-lending library they’ve set up near the

church. They also compile care packages for the people they’ve met along the way.

While Orion hasn’t the resources to continue to pay staff’s way, the group is committed for the long term. Each staff member raises as much as possible toward the approximately \$600 in travel and lodging costs per person. Together they seek contributions– in kind and cash – for the supplies they need to accomplish the work. This is no sophisticated fund raising effort. So far, in addition to tapping their friends and relatives, they’ve had spaghetti dinners, car washes, and put on concerts at a Northeast neighborhood bar.

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Grateful for the generosity of the sympathetic, the group has been surprised by the reactions of others. They hear from people who think the houses should all just be bull-dozed. Others wonder why the owners don’t just clean up their own messes. Most often, people assume the work is done. In general, the news media has moved on. But for these dedicated volunteers who have witnessed the devastation first hand, there’s a sense that the Ninth ward missed out on whatever help came. Even today there are only a few FEMA trailers in sight, electricity is rare.

For Alicia Corbett, a family coordinator, the Ninth Ward reminds her of home. “I grew up in the Upper Peninsula with my Gram, in the same

house with two of my uncles, a cousin and my brother. I had a cousin across the street and other relatives just down the street. It's a dying way of life with families all close and connected like that. And that's how the Ninth Ward is, or was. Now those families are thrown to the four corners. They deserve a chance to come back, to recreate that, rebuild. Who are we to say they shouldn't come back?"

In planning their third trip, which took place in March, River of Hope recognized that, while the unskilled volunteers can and should continue to gut houses and bear witness for the increasing number of returnees, skilled workers were going to be needed to begin the actual rebuilding effort.

Jeff Greischer, president of Tech Build, a general contracting and construction firm based in Fairmont Minnesota had followed the project through his wife who is involved in the Minnesota Parent Leadership Network which is administered by Orion. When Greischer heard that the River of Hope was interested in engaging trades people to help make the transition from gutting homes to rebuilding, he got excited. A member of the board of Minnesota Association of Builders and Contractors, he's a strong advocate for involving the trades in community service work. He and his daughter accompanied the group in March. While she worked on the gutting team he led four electricians and a plumber in getting one house roughed in and ready for sheet rock – a giant step toward livability.

Greg Hinrichs, a 44-year-old student nearing the end of his electrician's training, was one of those electricians. He acknowledges that he was drawn to the project despite being a bit of a naysayer. He wasn't sure rebuilding was the right thing; but, he's become a convert. He sees that these families worked hard for the American dream of a home. Many have paid for their houses over the course of decades. Now the houses are ruined.

The insurance companies blame the flood, not the storm, and refuse to provide coverage. The people have nowhere to go. "They're destitute. They need a roof over their heads. The city is doing nothing for the residents."

Hinrich's instructor, Jeff Chase agrees. As they drove through the devastation on the way from the airport he was overwhelmed, but when they drove into the Ninth Ward they discovered destruction ten times worse.

the exorbitant rates of the private contractors who are deluging the place.

Senator Mark Dayton and Heidi Kraus, one of the Senator's staffers, joined River of Hope for a day of work in March. Dayton couldn't agree more with Chase's assessment, "I was appalled to see how little recovery work had been accomplished by government agencies and contractors, despite the \$62 billion for Hurricane Katrina relief that Congress had appropriated." Kraus calls the River

## A River and a Bridge

When Cheryl Eubanks approached the River of Hope group to ask for food and supplies, neither she nor they understood how extraordinary her request might seem to New Orleans' residents. She simply told them she had 8,000 residents in St. Bernard Parish to feed and no food supply. River of Hope, which she found in the Ninth Ward, gave her all the food they had and as many supplies as they could spare. And, with this simple exchange a new bridge was built.

Cheryl Eubanks, an experienced volunteer manager from Texas, came to New Orleans to help out for a week or so in September. She never left. First working as a volunteer in St. Bernard Parish, she was eventually hired by the Parish to coordinate relief efforts. When she tracked down River of Hope, she was on a mission and completely unaware of the anomaly it might seem for St. Bernard Parish to go looking for help from their neighboring ward.

On their early trips to New Orleans after the storm, River of Hope crews thought the cars stacked one atop another along the southeast border between the Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish were an oddity. Then, they discovered the truth: the cars were a barrier. The cars created a wall between the mostly African American, working class neighborhoods of the Lower Ninth Ward and the mostly white middle class neighborhood on the western border of the Parish. Before August 29, these two neighboring communities seemed separate worlds. The stacked cars are symbolic of the distrust and life differences that separated them. But today, the residents of these distinct neighborhoods have far more in common than they'd ever imagined. They now share a struggle to get by and get back. Residents of each who have returned face the same question: rebuild or leave?

If they decide to stay, they can count on continued help from River of Hope and the partnership of their neighbors. River of Hope is committed to sharing its supplies with the Parish which is still without a grocery store and places to purchase food, household or building products. In turn, St. Bernard's Parish is planning to help with an upcoming community outreach event (See *The Ripple Effect*, page 7.) which will take place on the grounds of New Salem Baptist Church in the Upper Ninth. These may seem small steps, but River of Hope is a testament to the power of helping to

Chase was struck by the impartiality of the storm and flood's wrath. Yet, he observed that the recovery effort hasn't been nearly as equitable. The downtown business areas are up and running, but not much is happening where people live – especially those who can't afford to pay

of Hope effort "sad and beautiful." While she finds the federal assistance efforts embarrassingly ineffective and inadequate, she sees beauty in the fact that "people from Minnesota took it upon themselves to bring hope to the residents of the Ninth Ward."

On the last day of their visit in March, Pastor Jones asked Chase to stay back at the church. Over each trip so far, the staff had worked little by little on clearing out and gutting the church. It was ready now for rewiring, sheet rocking. As the day turned to night, the volunteers began gathering at their now familiar “headquarters.” When the moment came, no one was quite prepared for how emotional it would be. With a flip of a switch, the lights of the steeple came back on for the first time in more than six months. With little or no electricity anywhere else in the neighborhood, the beacon shone as the symbol of hope New Salem Baptist Church has become, in part, because of River of Hope’s efforts.

### **The River Flows in Two Directions**

Pastor Jones doesn’t wonder what God was doing when he sent the River of Hope anymore. He says “You couldn’t write the history of recovery of the Ninth Ward without Rebecca and the River of Hope. They were the first ones in. They didn’t set and wait. They got off their rear ends – pardon the expression – and came down here to work. Boy did they surprise me. No one compares. I’ve never seen a group of ladies work so hard.” As much as their hard work has earned his respect, it’s their spirit for which he’s most grateful. “They just love people. They have been in the pain and hurt. I see them hug people. Other groups come in and say ‘give it up’...That just hurts these people whose homes are about all they had. They can’t take it. Rebecca and the River of Hope folks come in and give hope.”

Between trips Thomley stays in contact with the people whose names she collected at her mother’s suggestion – and all the families they’ve met and helped since. She asks what they need most, and makes a concerted effort to bring it. She brought Larry Hauck the sheet rock and lumber he needed to start

repairs on his own house. He’s just one of the folks who comes to see her – and now the others they’ve gotten to know – every time the River of Hope makes a trip down. “I’m just flabbergasted that so many people would come from so far to do this dirty work.”



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Frank Fortenberry, the Hotel Monteleone’s door man who Thomley had befriended on her first trip observed, “They work from 7:30am until dark. The women work like men. They come back just covered with dirt, exhausted. What they start, they finish. They seem to enjoy the work they’re doing, and they do it with loving concern. In my 44 years at the hotel, I never saw or met people with so much heart. I wish I had as much heart.”

Thomley and her team of officers believe that the work has had a powerful impact on the company and its employees as well. Stephen Hage, Chief Administrative Officer, talks about the amount of money companies spend on team and leadership building activities. “We did this because we’re a mission-driven organization. We’re about helping people. But this,” he says, “has had a remarkable impact on our staff.” He reports that mid-level managers have gained tremendous skill and confidence as leaders, making decisions on the ground, managing work teams of staff. The teams themselves have been set up to mix people with colleagues with whom they don’t often have an opportunity to interact. The staff have not only experienced each other “pulling their own weight plus a 100%,” they’ve developed deeper cross-department relationships and a strong sense of pride in the organization overall.

Chase can see the value it could have for the rest of his students. “I wish I could bring every one of my Dunwoody students down there. It’s about being human. You begin to understand that there are no real boundaries between us. You can’t fathom what happened to these people, but you see that they’re really no different from you. You welcome the chance to help.” With just \$10,000, he believes he could take another instructor and 25 students for seven days this summer. The effort would not only result in rewiring for seven houses, it would instill in his students a sense of their own power and responsibility to make a difference.

A new amendment to city ordinances<sup>1</sup> gives the city authority over all houses that aren’t making progress toward rebuilding by the end of August.

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<sup>1</sup> Division 4 of Article IV of Chapter 26 was amended with Section 26-262 “to establish a deadline for the remediation or demolition of properties damaged by Hurricane’s Katrina and/or Rita...”

The city will declare houses that haven't been cleared of mold, cleaned, gutted and secured a public nuisance. While the amendment posits the possibility that the city may choose to repair or rehabilitate these "public nuisances", demolition and removal are the options most likely to be employed on Ninth Ward houses. The clock is ticking. Pastor Jones has identified 37 additional houses that need to be gutted before then.

Sharon Weiss, one of the few non-staff members who has been on two of the trips, encourages others to join the effort. "It's an opportunity of a lifetime, one of the most fulfilling things you'll ever do. River of Hope has got it together. They've learned from their experiences, they know what's needed. They not only clear debris and rebuild homes, but establish rapport with people stranded without housing, electricity or water. They established a home base to work from when it seemed impossible. They provide supplies, food, manpower and a willingness to help in a situation that seems like a broken puzzle to the nation."

Thomley and her team would like to see both individuals and other companies join them. "Our trips are generally over long weekends – when working people are available." Greischer has committed Tech Build to a full partnership with

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**–Marya Hage**

Orion in future River of Hope trips. He just returned from a planning trip in which he surveyed exactly the materials and logistical support he'll need in June to rebuild four of the homes that have been gutted. In materials alone he estimates they'll have to raise \$150,000. But he too has the "just do it" mentality that has fueled the River of Hope's success.

Greischer's eager to recruit as many crafts people to volunteer as he can. In the coming weeks and months, he hopes to get others from Minnesota ABC involved. For every dollar invested, he estimates the effort will return five dollars worth of work. To trades people he says, "Getting involved now would be one of your most satisfying experiences, life changing."

Marya Hage, Orion founder, sees it this way, "I sincerely believe that there are so many people that want to help. This is a concrete way to express your concern for others. The only things that

we do in life that are important are the things we do for other people. Nothing else matters."

None of the people who've gone on the trips mince words about the work. Jen Van Rooy acknowledges, "If I had to imagine my worst job ever, it would be gutting moldy homes. But it's worth it." Senator Dayton concurs, "Their work: clearing out and rebuilding homes, small business and churches is not for the faint-hearted or the weak-stomached! It is, however an unforgettable experience."

Pastor Jones's has his own way of asking for help. "We pray... and then expect God to come out of heaven and help us. But that's not how it works. He sends people. He sent Rebecca [Thomley]. To see God, just watch the River of Hope. The Ninth Ward needed them. The Ninth Ward still needs them."

## ***The Ninth Ward Still Needs... YOU***

River of Hope plans on continuing relief trips and ongoing efforts in the Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish until there's no longer a need.

**Volunteers, cash donations, and in-kind contributions are welcomed.**

Contact Jenny Schraut @ 612-432-5915 or send a tax deductible donation to:

Disaster Relief Fund  
Zenith Services, Incorporated  
44 North 28th Avenue, Suite A  
St. Cloud, Minnesota 56303

