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## **KATRINA SURVIVORS FIND HELP IN COLUMBIA (Published in the September 24, 2005, Columbia Business Times) - 9/24/2005**

September 15, 2005

About 1,100 Words

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### KATRINA SURVIVORS FIND HELP IN COLUMBIA

COLUMBIA, Mo. – For Cornelius Dickerson, the worst part about the disaster in New Orleans was not the dire straits in which he and his family found themselves, it was the feeling that nobody cared.

The memories of his ordeal are the tough part, he said. The dead bodies, the heat, the horrible smell, the lack of water, and the hunger are all fixed in his mind. "Down there, seeing it with your own eyes is kind of different than looking at it on TV or just talking about it," Dickerson said. "To me, like, no one cared. [The] NOPD, that's New Orleans Police, they're just standing around looking."

One of the lucky ones who got out of New Orleans before being completely trapped by the flooding, Dickerson spent two nights in a hotel during the hurricane. Then the waters began to rise, and the hotel manager informed the guests that it would have to shut down. Borrowing a car from his sister-in-law and gas money from her boyfriend, he got out of town on August 30 with his wife, Cheryle, and three kids, Jeremy, 17, Jerome, 16, and Tyrenika, 14.

Finding the first available gas 50 miles outside the metropolitan area, they filled up their tank and kept driving, eventually coming to Columbia. He and his wife had lived in Columbia years ago and liked it, but had moved to New Orleans in 2003 to be closer to his father-in-law who had heart trouble.

Dickerson is just one of a growing number of Katrina survivors in Columbia being helped by local businesses who are hiring refugee employees for temporary and permanent jobs. The Missouri Division of Workforce Development's Career Center at 1500 Vandiver and Job Finders at 1729 W. Broadway are providing assistance and advice to job seekers. Meanwhile, local temporary agencies are handling the brunt of those looking for work, with Express Personnel and Manpower International probably handling the most. One impediment to employment for hurricane refugees has been that many lack identification, but the U.S. Department of Homeland Security recently issued a directive relaxing the rules.

Michelle Hill-Ishmael, owner of Express Personnel, said her firm processed 102 Katrina-

related survivors last week and 22 previously who were friends of local families. Local Manpower International Branch Manager Susan McKenzie said her office has spoken to about 20 survivors so far and has placed about five applicants with local companies, although she could not say where because of confidentiality requirements. The local office of Kelly Services refused to give any information, referring media calls to its corporate headquarters in Michigan, which did not respond.

Besides Square D, which has hired another Katrina survivor and plans to hire two to four more this week, other companies on the City of Columbia's Web site reportedly hiring displaced workers include First Student Bus Company, Wehmeyer Heating and Air and the internal medicine office of Dr. Jeffrey Frey. According to media reports, large companies such as Wal-Mart and State Farm Insurance are helping their displaced employees find work in their other stores and offices around the country. McKenzie said Manpower sent more than 500 people to cover for its closed or destroyed Gulf Coast offices, set up a hotline for its employees and temporaries, and helped them locate shelter, find jobs and collect paychecks.

Isle of Capri Casinos Inc., which operates a casino in the hurricane-ravaged town of Biloxi, Miss., has frozen hiring for any open positions in its other casinos and given its displaced employees a deadline of Friday, September 16, to apply for them, according to Tammy Royston, spokesperson for the Isle of Capri Casino in Boonville. The company operates a relief fund to assist its employees with disaster-related expenses and announced recently that it will continue to distribute payroll checks to displaced salaried employees for nine months and hourly employees for 90 days.

Dickerson started working last week on the assembly line at Square D, a manufacturer of circuit breakers in Columbia, hoping that the temporary job will eventually turn permanent. "He's doing a great job," said Gail Conley, director of human resources. "He may be building a circuit breaker that will eventually be in New Orleans in residential homes or commercial buildings."

Dickerson compliments the Square D employees for showing concern and helping him and his family by providing clothing and school supplies for his children, who enrolled last week at Rock Bridge High School and Jefferson Junior High. He also thanks the Red Cross Shelter at the Calvary Baptist Church, which allowed his family to spend two nights there. Some friends from the church have provided his family with a four-bedroom apartment until the end of December. Dickerson said he wanted to thank Bill Lloyd, a member of the church, for letting he and his wife borrow a car.

While his family's life has been upended, Dickerson says he is happy to be in a place where he can provide food for his family, unlike the situation he left in New Orleans. "People are hungry," he said. "If you didn't have money, you couldn't eat, because one store was open, and it was like \$10 or \$15 to buy something to eat. And if you didn't have no money, you didn't eat, unless you had packed your food the day before the storm."

Still frustrated with what he saw as a lack of response by the New Orleans police department, Dickerson noted that their slogan is "To Protect and To Serve." "I could pretty much understand that they were trying to protect, but serve, I can't say they was doing that," he said. "To me, they were mostly there to protect the people from looting and stealing out of the stores. There's people dying, and [they] all [were] just standing there, like 20 or 30 of [them], just laughing and talking and looking at young girls."

Dickerson thinks the city should have been more prepared and doesn't understand why the emergency responders couldn't have gotten hold of any boats on a coastline filled with places to buy or rent them. Going stir-crazy in his hotel room with no electricity and water and thinking he might be able to help, Dickerson snuck past the manager, who had instructed the hotel guests not to leave for their own safety.

"I couldn't just sit there and do nothing," he said. "So I did one walk around the little areas that I could, and I actually talked to some of the rescue people and the police to try to

volunteer to help do something. It was like people were floating right there, and [they were acting] like it never happened. They were just passing by like they don't see nothing."

Thankful to Square D and the Columbia community for helping him and his family, Dickerson hopes to find a permanent home in Columbia. "It's just a nice place, so easygoing, and you don't have to worry about too much violence and crime," Dickerson said. "You've got friendly people here, and caring people, and it's not hard to try to make it and live a life."

