

Light at the end of the tunnel

BNSF Railway spearheads initiative to help rebuild homes in Southeast Texas

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BNSF Railway, the Port of Beaumont, Southeast Texas Economic Development Foundation (SETEDF) and Trans-Global Solutions Inc. (TGS) teamed up to help rebuild homes in Jefferson, Orange and Hardin counties affected by Hurricane Harvey. The initiative took place Wednesday, May 2, when almost 150 volunteers put up sheetrock, and delivered food and water to homes affected by the storm. The water was provided by TGS and the food was provided by SETEDF.

“Because of our relationship with the city of Beaumont, our yard office in Beaumont, the Port of Beaumont, and because Beaumont is so important to us in a number of ways, we realized that while Houston was heavily affected by the storm, this area sustained (around) 15 more inches. ... The center cities of this community were addressed and looked relatively normal, but when you go out (of the center cities) to some of the areas of the community, like New Orleans (after Katrina) and like Houston (after Harvey), those areas are truly devastated,” said Joseph Faust, director of public affairs for BNSF Railway Company. “So we decided to work with some of our partners here in Beaumont to see what we could do as a follow-up to rekindle the enthusiasm and interest of this community — to address some of the needs. While the community did a lot and the state did a lot — (we wanted) to do a little bit more to help people out.”

Faust said volunteers helped rebuild 10 homes on May 2.

“There’s one resident that needs a wheelchair ramp and we’re going to be building that as well,” he added. “We’re going to be doing what (needs to be done) to reinvigorate the community.”

James O’Donley, regional manager of Economic



Photos by Kevin King

Joseph Faust, director of public affairs for BNSF Railway, Marilyn Guillory of Beaumont and Pauline Hurst, coordinator at Greater St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church in Lake Charles and member of National Baptist Convention of America’s disaster relief program

Development, BNSF Railway Company, credited Diane Wagenaar, BNSF Railway sales manager, for creating and organizing Hope After Harvey.

“I was touched by her devotion and dedication to this opportunity,” he said.

O’Donley said the long-term relationships between

BNSF and Jim Rich, executive director of SETEDF; Jessica Hill, executive director of the Orange County EDC; and Karl Segura Sr., manager of Business Development – Entergy Texas Economic Development; aided in bringing Hope After Harvey to fruition.

The first home that the Hope After Harvey crew helped rebuild was the home of Marilyn Guillory, who lives on S. Ninth Street in Beaumont.

“I’d never gone through anything like this before. Water was coming in from everywhere,” Guillory said of her experience during Harvey. “There was only myself and my 15-month-old granddaughter, and my aunt was 107. We tried to figure out ways to stop it. At first it was enough to where we thought we could start bucketing it out. It didn’t do any good.”

Guillory said when she tried to go to her neighbor’s house to borrow a wet vacuum, the water on her street was up to her chest.

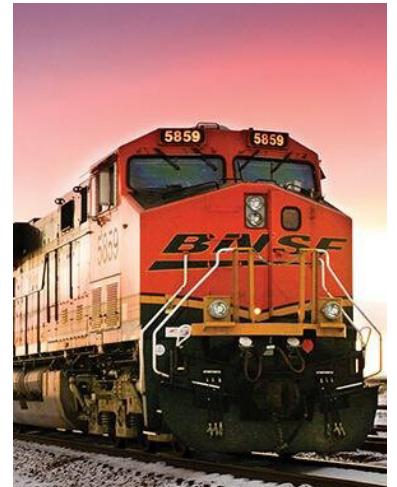
“We did everything we could to try to protect my aunt,” she said, with tears rolling down her cheeks. “She was too fragile to take out, so we couldn’t leave, but at the same time she knew what was going on.”

Although her aunt, Callie Green, survived the flood, she passed away a month after the storm on Sept. 25 due to a respiratory illness, Guillory said. She said FEMA told her she was ineligible for benefits because the house was livable. Guillory said she believes that because of her age, the black mold in the house that wasn’t discovered until the home was gutted is what caused her aunt’s death. Although Green did not survive, Guillory said she believes divine intervention is what brought the Hope After Harvey team to her aid.



Ernest Bezdek, director of Trade Development at Port of Beaumont, drills a piece of sheetrock onto the wall of a house in Vidor.

Chris Ballenger, industrial product sales manager at BNSF Railway; Joseph Faust, director of public affairs for BNSF Railway; Demetrius Moffett, pastor of Orange Church of God and president of Tri-County Disaster Rebuild SETX; Airon Reynolds, pastor of Borden Chapel Baptist Church and executive director of the Helbig Community Development Corporation; Diane Wagenaar, BNSF Railway sales manager and Scot Bates, general director of industrial product sales at BNSF Railway



"It lets me know that God is on my side," she said. "God made sure that we were taken care of."

BNSF also presented a \$5,000 check to Airon Reynolds, pastor of Borden Chapel Baptist Church and executive director of the Helbig Community Development Corporation, a non-profit with a mission "to provide affordable housing for the local community," according to guidestar.org.

Faust said employees, as well as the company itself, contributed to the \$5,000 donation.

About BNSF

BNSF Railway is one of North America's leading freight transportation companies. BNSF operates approximately 32,500 route miles of track in 28 states and also operates in three Canadian provinces. BNSF is one of the top transporters of consumer goods, grain and agricultural products, low-sulfur coal, and industrial goods such as petroleum, chemicals, housing materials, food and beverages. BNSF's shipments help feed, clothe, supply, and power American homes and businesses every day.

According to "The History of BNSF: A Legacy for the 21st Century," the railway is actually more than 160 years old. Not only is BNSF a merger between Burlington Northern Railroad and Santa Fe Railroad, it is actually comprised of 390 railroads that the company acquired over its 16-decade history.

The Beaumont area is an important market for BNSF, Faust said.

"We do care about the communities where we operate. ... Strategically, Beaumont is very important to BNSF, particularly around grain season. We move grain trains into and out of the Port of Beaumont for export," he said. "We have a rich history of operations and people (in Beaumont) and people are what make the difference." ■



A Hope After Harvey crew strategizes before taking on the task of helping to rebuild a home on S. Ninth Street in Beaumont.

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