

## **A Statement of Grace in an Era of Government Indifference**

by Arthur O'Donnell and Audrey R. Alvarado

### **GRACE:** Genuine Response and Community Enterprise

In recent weeks we've been flooded with images of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and her sister Rita. Most, the vast majority, were heart-wrenching and heart-breaking pictures of lost homes, lost souls and lost lives.

There was one picture, however, that seemed to counter the rising tide of destruction and misery experienced by the people New Orleans and the northern Gulf Coast. One woman was giving a pedicure to another. Both were smiling – even laughing, perhaps at the absurdity of the situation. That picture was of beauty, even more beautiful than a pair of cleaned feet with trimmed and polished toenails in a place where mud and crud and fouled water had left its own footprints of despair. It was a picture of genuine respect and heartfelt response to the question: *Where there is so much to do, what can I do?*

And that picture was of Grace.

Grace, we are taught as children, is a prayer of thanks or a blessing performed before a meal. But it is also a state of being marked by kindness and courtesy, by compassion and response to the plight of others, and of a sincere desire to help.

Grace is an attitude, a characteristic we tend to associate with saints and kindly grandmothers, with athletes, performers and artists of many types. A graceful dancer, a gracious host, a grateful heart uplifted by the power of Art.

Grace is also how to define and understand the work of America's nonprofit sector. It takes many forms and is found on many fronts of our society. In New Orleans and Gulfport and Biloxi, the response of our government has earned criticism and complaint for its lack of preparedness and coordination; for its lack of Grace.

Well before the federal emergency mismanagement agency woke up and began to bring needed relief – before FEMA's director was even aware of where and what the most pressing needs were – the local nonprofit sector was on the scene, and in the front lines of response:

\* The American Red Cross – repeating its role as the first responder to crisis and catastrophe – as it has so many thousands of times before.

\* Local churches and their congregations, setting aside any concern for denomination or religious affiliation opening their doors and hearts to the homeless and bereft.

\* Volunteers of every age, race, religion and region of the country. So many, in fact, that organizers were hard pressed to contain and manage the flood of compassion.

This then is another picture of Grace: A genuine response and community enterprise that springs up within us all when tapped by adversity.

We know of other instances where Grace prevails, and we understand the part that the nonprofit community plays. Nonprofits add tremendous value to society and play a critical role in enhancing the quality of life in local communities. Every American has been touched at one time or another by the work of a nonprofit.

**Some examples:**

St. Paul's Chapel in lower Manhattan became an ad hoc MASH unit for survivors after collapse of the twin towers on September 11, 2001. Truth to tell, we are not sure we have ever seen God in the churches of our youth but we saw God's work inside that church, long after 9/11, in the homespun tapestries of sympathy that hung on its walls, handmade quilts from school children and others across the country and from around the world.

These reminded us most of another set of quilts that comprise the AIDS Quilt Project. Started in San Francisco in response to another kind of catastrophe that also was marked by the unfortunate lack of preparedness and coordination by the federal government.

In recent years, we've come to believe that the nonprofit sector should be dependent on government or a replacement for government when government proves indifferent to the most pressing human needs.

That's not what it should be or was ever intended to be.

In recent years, philanthropy seems to have fallen out of favor in the public eye and the media. Nonprofit groups only appear in pages of your local newspapers as some modern form of noblesse oblige, a way to tap the compassion or variety of privileged classes as if it were the sap on a maple tree of life. Or, increasingly nonprofits and the people who run them appear in scandal sheets when charity begins in the home of its executive director, or a service agency is discovered to have cooked books or a self-serving attitude. In other words, in a state of disgrace. That's not how it should be, either.

The time has come for nonprofits of all sizes and scope to come together and restore our tradition of operating from that sacred place of grace. Much like the scenes that have played out more recently in the Gulf Coast we have come alive in our singular focus on serving and aiding those in need.

Yet despite the value that nonprofits add to American communities, the contributions to the economy and overall enhancement to national life, the survival of these vital organizations is uncertain. The devolution of political power from federal to state government, reduction in government funding, and public distrust of charitable organizations, has created a challenging environment for all nonprofit organizations.

Now more than ever, nonprofits need to unite and develop a common vision and shared voice for the future developed from the ground up and culminating in a Nonprofit Congress to be held October 15-18, 2006.

Goals of the congress are to:

- Strengthen the resolve and resources of nonprofit leaders to engage in public policy and ensure that nonprofits are instrumental in taking on roles that enhance the democratic process in the United States.
- Invigorate the passion and commitment of the current generation of nonprofit executives, while enlisting and making room for a new generation of nonprofit leaders.
- Empower local, state, and national organizations to speak for nonprofit organizations and advocate at all levels of society.
- Communicate a nonprofit agenda to the country and to our elected leaders and invite those seeking the Presidency in 2008 to share their views on the sector and their vision for our country.

To achieve these goals, we must come together in a collective manner to outline the overarching principles that guide our actions to fulfill our purpose. We know all too well that the work of this sector is obvious during times of tremendous and pressing needs, such as Hurricane Katrina, but there are catastrophes daily with the loss of life due to indifference, the inability to pay for adequate health care, or the loss of potential through poorly performing educational systems, polluted air and water leading to long-term health problems in our most vulnerable populations – our young and senior citizens.

Who could have imagined twenty-five years ago that in a country as great as America we would issue daily warnings that, due to bad air quality, vulnerable populations are advised to stay indoors? Who has responsibility and obligation to turn the tide and the direction we are headed? Who can be prepared to the future by shaping where we want to go as opposed to let the unknown guide us? It is for the dreamers that dreams can be obtained. It is for those left wondering what could we have done to prepare for what has come that will find themselves overwhelmed and paralyzed.

The indifference or loss of lives and futures is too high a price to pay – people are not dispensable commodities. The role and obligation of our government and the public it represents is one that cannot turn its back when times are tough and as was so clearly represented with the aftermath of Katrina cannot be ill prepared or completely disorganized and indifferent.

The status quo is not an option. But how can we imagine the new insights and new possibilities that can inspire our work and tip us toward a better future?

The Nonprofit Congress will be formed by small steps leading to gigantic leaps for the sector overall. These small steps will consist of state and local convenings of

nonprofit leaders and volunteers who have a stake in the future role of the sector. The gigantic leap will be the culmination of these local meetings at the national gathering. We can continue to accept a future that is handed over to us or take it upon ourselves to create the image of a vision that does not lead a society of unfulfilled promises.

We are interdependent as a sector yet we work in carefully constructed silos that keep us apart from each other. Thus, reducing the possibility of the power of collective action through our many mission yet common values that guide our work. It is through the acknowledgement of these values that will strengthen our resolve to work through the small yet powerful differences that threaten to divide and conquer the sector.

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**Find out more at <http://www.nonprofitcongress.org/>**