

Rescuers with pizza come to aid of victims

By CRAIG T. NEISES

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A piping hot pizza isn't quite like manna from Heaven, but for the people of Bay St. Louis, Miss., cheese and pepperoni pizzas served up free in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina probably came pretty close.



Served up courtesy of a Minnesota pizza man, Bill Graves, and Burlington insurance agent from Tucuman, Argentina, the pizzas were for many hurricane victims, their first hot meal in days.

"We ran out the first day," said Carlos Capdevila, an American Family Insurance agent in Burlington who represents many Domino's Pizza franchisees across the country and who spent four days in the hurricane-ravaged South last week.

In the days after Katrina struck and the depth of the devastation sank in, Capdevila was talking on the phone with a friend and Domino's franchisee in Minnesota who owns a mobile store complete with a freezer, two ovens and a full kitchen.

As the conversation unfolded, and the two friends expressed their dismay about the relief effort and feeling as though



they weren't helping, a plan was hatched to drive that pizzeria on wheels south to Mississippi.

Early Friday morning, Sept. 2, the trailer was loaded for bear with personal products like soap and shampoo, towels and candy for the kids, and started on a 21-hour trek to Gulfport, Miss.

From there, the two were directed west to the town of Bay St. Louis, which has been described as "Ground Zero" for the storm's arrival on land. "Imagine a town completely down to the ground and somebody spread millions and millions of matches," Capdevila said, describing his impression of what Katrina left behind.

Immediately, the insurance man, the pizza man and two others started making pizzas, and within 15 or 20 minutes, had a line 100-people long.

"We were making pizzas like crazy," Capdevila said, adding that customers folded their own pizza boxes because the pizza makers didn't have time.



The first day, they made 850 pizzas — cheese and pepperoni, only. The second day, they made 1,200. A local franchisee with a cold truck donated ingredients to keep the effort going.

"Basically we just gave them away," Capdevila said. "We gave up a lot of the stuff we brought with us."

Some people came and asked for just one pizza. Others, thinking of the relatives and, sometimes, neighbors they had living in their homes, came and asked for 10.

"Nobody asked for more than what they needed,"

Capdevila said. "They were so humble about it, in a way embarrassed to be basically begging for food

Besides making pizzas, Capdevila spent a day working through insurance issues with Domino's franchise owners in the area. With the help of friend and State Farm agent Dave Vavroch of Burlington, Capdevila put together a



question-and-answer booklet on the topics of insurance and flood insurance.

"That was almost as well-received as the pizzas," Capdevila said.

Besides storm victims, pizzas also went to relief workers who were served at a separate window. Those included group of paramedics from Cedar Rapids, National Guard troops, people from the nearby Wal-Mart who were providing goods to hurricane victims and electrical line workers from Canada.

Eventually, franchisees from all over the U.S. started showing up and pitching in, some with their own mobile stores.

And although Capdevila and his friend are back home, the mobile restaurant remained behind and is still being used.

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