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STORY BY J.L. BIBB

DAVID VANDERPOOL, M.D., A FRIEND INDEED

# One man's mission to help a devastated region

*Editor's note: Hurricane Katrina landed near the Mississippi-Louisiana state line on the morning of Aug. 29, 2005. It has been labeled as the third-strongest hurricane to hit the U.S. coast and resulted in more than 1,000 deaths and more than \$80 billion in damage. The following article is published in memory of the event and as a reminder of the still strong need for aid to the region. —JLB*

Five days in Bay St. Louis was all it took. He saw the damage, the earth-shattering devastation, and he knew what he had to do. Help those people.

For Dr. David Vanderpool, giving back just came naturally. He couldn't exactly explain it, but seeing homes obliterated and Americans starving hit home with the 46-year-old surgeon. He went down to the Gulf Coast on an impulse, just himself, his 18-year-old son and nearly \$10,000 of medical supplies, which he paid for out of pocket. And after seeing the desperate landscape, Dr. Vanderpool knew it wouldn't be his last trip to the shores ravaged by Katrina.

## MAKING THE FIRST FORAY

The Dallas native, turned Williamson County resident, had never been to Biloxi before last year. But five days after Katrina hit, he found himself taking an 18-hour trek down the interstate and into an alien nation.

No road signs. Debris on every street. A marked absence of ambulances, fire fighters and policemen. If not for the hand-held GPS system he purchased that week, the Vanderpools would have surely gotten lost on their way to the Bay Vista Baptist Church, in Biloxi, Miss.

"The trip should only have lasted eight hours, but there was a ton of debris on the interstate," he says. "When we got there, we joined the American Red Cross Disaster Relief group. We went around, feeding kids and administering medicine. We found seven adults

and five kids in one house that was only 800 square feet. They hadn't eaten in three days.

"We drove through the streets and began asking if anyone needed medical care. People came out of the woodwork. You have to remember that the nearest hospital was in Jackson, and it was hours away. Nobody had cars, all of the ambulances were destroyed, and most doctors had evacuated. There was simply no transportation and no health care available. So on the first day, we gave out 250 tetanus shots within six hours. And that was all I had taken down — I mean that was a lot — but it was all gone in a matter of hours."

For Dr. Vanderpool, it was not the type of medical care he was used to. Earlier that year, he had opened Lavé MD, a treatment and research center in Brentwood that specializes in treating varicose veins, spider veins and sun-damaged skin. For the board-certified surgeon, Katrina triage might sound like a far cry from home. But Dr. Vanderpool refused to be phased by the shocking conditions he encountered.

"At one stop, we were told about a man with an alligator bite," Dr. Vanderpool explains. "It had taken a lot of muscle out of his leg. So we lifted him into the back of my truck, cleaned out his wound and stitched him up. Then we had to put him back in his house — there was no place to take him. Because there were a lot of tornadoes in the area after the hurricane, the hospital helicopter in Jackson couldn't fly over to get him.

"So we checked on him and changed his dressings twice a day. Of course, we had no pain medicine, because I couldn't take morphine or anything like that with me across state lines. Eventually, the helicopter was able to fly to him, and I found out later that they were



DR. DAVID  
VANDERPOOL

able to save his leg. But it was pretty rough for a while."

## MORE TRIPS, MORE AID

Dr. Vanderpool says that even now hospitals in the area are barely operational.

"Right now, the hospitals there are only up to 15 percent capacity," he explains. "That is after about one year. The people who are left there don't have insurance. Basically, it's all free care. So, we've turned our focus to delivering medications to them."

In the time since he first went down, Dr. Vanderpool has made three more trips to the region. But he says it is hard for doctors to get into the area and to receive the type of accreditation necessary to practice medicine there. In fact, it was only because Mississippi allowed an "emergency recognition" of his medical licenses in Tennessee and Texas that he was allowed legally to enter the state and provide medical care. Dr. Vanderpool says this is not the case in Louisiana.

"Just after Katrina, we went to Louisiana's Web site," he says. "There wasn't much information. So we went to Mississippi's site, and there was a banner running across the top that said something like, 'Any physician with any valid state license, we will honor in Mississippi.' So we called the Louisiana folks, and they told us they weren't doing that. So we chose to go to Mississippi. Louisiana, to my knowledge, never gave emergency recognition."

But Dr. Vanderpool wants to spark change. In fact, he has set up his own nonprofit organization, Mobile Medical Disaster Relief, to make it easier for other doctors to offer their expertise.

"Because the government can't order doctors to a certain area, unless they are in the military, it's hard to organize physicians together for the common cause of bringing medical relief," he explains. "I called the American Medical Association and asked them about setting up an organization that could collect physicians to help, but the AMA said nothing like that existed.

"I believe we need to establish a disaster relief organization of physicians for this nation. It's amazing that we lack that, outside of the National Guard. Now I am trying to establish something that will result in sister organizations around the nation for the common purpose of organizing and managing disaster relief in America."

So far, Dr. Vanderpool says he has been successful in partnering with major drug manufacturers to supply aid through Mobile Medical Disaster Relief to the Gulf Coast.

"After the first trip, I saw that we needed more supplies," he says. "As a physician, I can't buy a lot of supplies on my own. Legally and ethically, it can't appear that I have my own pharmacy. When I came back from Mississippi, we set up the 501(c)(3) nonprofit so that we can have large quantities of medicines donated, which we can then transport to the area. These donations come from drug companies who produce excess product. Since January of this year, we've been able to take about \$350,000 worth of medication to the area."

For Dr. Vanderpool, it just makes sense to help. In fact, he says that using his skills to serve the greater good is a responsibility he gladly bears.

"The Lord has been good to me," he explains. "I feel strongly that I should be helping those who need it. I've been fortunate to go to medical school and to learn about vascular surgery. I have a responsibility to use my abilities to help others who might not be able to pay me back. That's just part of life — helping people who can't return anything to you."

## DR. VANDERPOOL, DAY TO DAY

During a regular day, Dr. Vanderpool tends to patients at his Brentwood (Maryland Farms) offices. His practice, Lavé MD, treats varicose veins, spider veins and sun-damaged skin, and it offers a full



Top: the Vanderpool family; Right: the Mobile Medical Disaster Relief team in action on the Gulf Coast



range of aesthetic procedures including laser hair removal, facials, massage and tattoo removal.

Dr. Vanderpool is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, a Member of the American College of Phlebology, the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery, the American Medical Association and the Tennessee Medical Association.

For more information about Dr. Vanderpool and his practice, visit [www.lavemd.com](http://www.lavemd.com) or call 615.833.3002.

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