

## Auction At 25

# Founders' Dream Pays Off

The scene is simple: a gathering of Church of the Brethren folk around a kitchen table pondering how to honor volunteers who answer the call to do disaster relief work.

They had answered those calls – in 1969 to Nelson County, Va., after Hurricane Camille devastated that community, claiming 259 lives, and in 1977 to Johnstown, Pa., after another destructive flood killed 84 persons there.

These were people who took a pickup truck with wooden rails on the sides, threw in tarps and tools and went where there was need.

Now, in the early 1990s they were trying to come up with a way to show appreciation for several decades of volunteerism in disaster response ministry.

Around that table were the hosts, Carlton and Hilda Ruff, with Elzie and Carrie Morris and Paul and Doris Hollinger, all now deceased.

“Let’s do something to celebrate the volunteers and their work,” is how Jerry Ruff recalls his parents’ account of that discussion. “And maybe make a little money, too.”

A meal? Maybe an oyster supper? What about an auction? Could any of those raise \$10,000 to \$12,000?

Eddie Morris, son of Elzie and Carrie, remembers that Catherine Lantz would always remind Elzie that he had allowed himself to dream: “Wouldn’t it be marvelous if we could raise \$10,000?”

It pays to dream. In 1993, the first Shenandoah District Disaster Ministries Auction raised over \$124,000! Now, as the auction celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the total has topped \$4.3 million. The biggest year was 2011 when proceeds exceeded \$221,000; every year has raised at least \$111,000.

Not everyone was convinced that an auction was the way to go. Mrs. Lantz, who served on the Shenandoah District Disaster Response Committee as the first auction was being planned and now is chair of the Auction Coordinating Committee, remembers that the late Ralph Miller expressed some doubt. “I don’t think it will go,” he told the committee. “But, if you’re intent on trying, I won’t hold you back,” she remembers him saying. He later expressed amazement and delight when the auction proved to be a hit.

The Hollingers’ son Steve has considered the success of the Shenandoah District auction from another perspective. A member of Manassas Church of the Brethren, he served on the committee for the Mid-Atlantic District’s auction about 35 years ago and sees some contrasts.



**AUCTION FOUNDERS** — These six volunteers were among the founders of the Shenandoah District Disaster Ministries Auction which is marking its 25th anniversary this year. Shown, from left to right, are Elzie Morris, Carrie Morris, Hilda Ruff, Carlton Ruff, Doris Hollinger, Paul Hollinger.

*Photo courtesy of Catherine Lantz*

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The planners here in the Shenandoah District decided to expand Mid-Atlantic's one-day format. "They were willing to do a cattle auction" on Friday evening, Hollinger remarks. "I consider that a stroke of genius, along with the oyster supper," he says.

He also has noticed that the high quality of crafts and hand-built furniture at the Shenandoah auction contributes to its success. Of course, he admits, having a livestock auction is more in keeping with the rural character of the Shenandoah District and not as compatible with the more urban nature of the Mid-Atlantic.

All three of these sons of the founders followed in their parents' footsteps in doing disaster relief work.

Jerry Ruff answered the appeal for volunteers immediately after Hurricane Camille devastated Nelson County. Chartered buses hauled in volunteers. He remembers "walking the river, looking for clues of loved ones" lost in the raging waters. US 29 was closed; helicopters were sent in to help with the search. The work was not pleasant – a lot of "mucking out" structures and cleaning freezers of spoiled food.

But, he kept going back when later distress calls came and now coordinates the Shenandoah District Disaster Ministries Committee.

Eddie Morris started going on disaster relief projects in the 1980s, but also recalls being on the set-up crew for the first livestock auction in 1993 when there were "so many volunteers you almost ran over yourself."

For Steve Hollinger, his inspiration was his parents' involvement. So, when his dad called with a plea, "Can you rustle together some guys to go to Paris, Texas" to work on a project there, Steve indeed rustled up a crew. Now, he's done 14 disaster trips.

All three of the sons value the friendships their parents formed with the other volunteers and with the residents they helped. Eddie remembers a long relationship with a family from West Virginia after the Morrises helped rebuild the family's home that burned, killing their children.

And, it seems, when husband and wife set out on a project, the wife ended up doing the cooking and the paperwork. Eddie remembers that when his mom cooked, the volunteers would ponder how they could work so hard and still gain weight!

(As a side note, he also remembers the dill pickles his mother brought back after working on a project in Mt. Olive, N.C.)

These auction "founders" went wherever there was need – Mississippi, Florida, Texas, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, North Carolina, even to St. Croix, where the Ruffs spent several months, four to five weeks at a time. They worked close to home, too, rebuilding a Fulks Run home from the ground up, using money from the sales of Rubbermaid projects that had been set aside in a fund earmarked for local projects.

And when they were not out doing disaster relief, Steve Hollinger remembers, "They would sit around and think 'What's next?' They liked to be doing stuff."

No doubt that's exactly what they were thinking when they gathered around a kitchen table at the Ruffs' home more than 25 years ago, wondering if an auction would be a good idea. Now, indeed, what's next?