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FORECAST

TUESDAY

Cape builder answers call of Katrina victims in Miss.

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UPPER TOWNSHIP — John Mirenda has a new appreciation for his pleasant, suburban life in Beesleys Point.

In September, he and friends from Christ Missionary Alliance in Vineland set up a makeshift soup kitchen in a parking lot in Waveland, Miss., to feed survivors and rescue workers after Hurricane Katrina.

When he returned to Mississippi in January, the Atlantic County commercial builder helped set up a construction headquarters in a former car dealership. The place serves as a temporary home for as

many as 120 volunteer workers, who face the daunting task of repairing or rebuilding as many homes as possible.

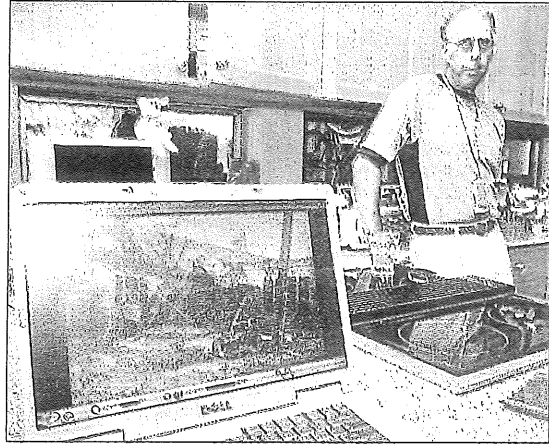
"My family prayed about it. I felt I had to do more," Mirenda said.

It was clear to Mirenda that Katrina left its share of psychic trauma.

Some homeowners who visited the volunteer work camp trembled visibly when thunderstorms passed overhead.

"We're not social workers by any means. If there's even a chance of a storm, people don't want to leave (the work camp)," he said. "They get very nervous."

□ See Builder, Page A6



Staff photo by Dale Gerhard

John Mirenda, of Upper Township, has committed to working one week per month in Mississippi through August.

PAGE A6 THE PRESS, ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.

FROM

Builder

(Continued from Page A1)

The volunteers use portable toilets at their headquarters. Insects are a plague. The standing water gives mosquitoes and other parasites ample places to reproduce.

"They have no-see-ums (tiny biting flies) there the size of our greenheads. You see them," he said.

The bugs are so bad, the roofers have to wear long sleeves and face nets like those worn by beekeepers.

It's a scene all too familiar to Mirenda, who once a month drives to Philadelphia and takes a plane to Gulfport, Miss., via Atlanta. It takes as long as five hours — sometimes longer.

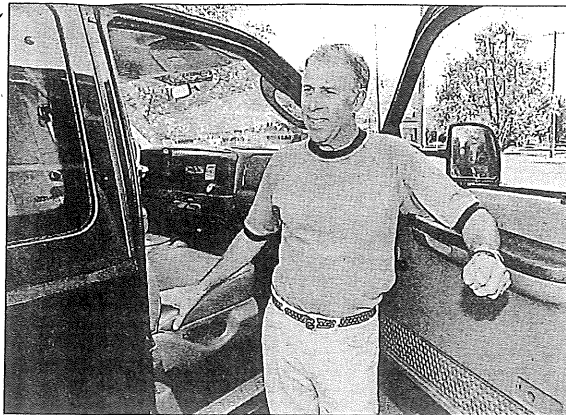
"You have to go to Mississippi to appreciate it. There's one pace there — slow, slow," he said.

In Waveland, he organizes work crews and assigns the day's volunteer jobs. Volunteers from all over the country knock on the door each week. The group has rebuilt 385 homes this year.

Local residents feed the volunteers homemade bread, jambalaya and grits, a southern classic.

For the volunteers, the hardest part might be picking which jobs to do first, Mirenda said. Generally, they try to take them in order but some jobs can be too intimidating in size for an inexperienced crew.

"On our work request, we make it mandatory that (owners) have the permitting required," he said.



Staff photo by Dale Gerhard

Building contractor John Mirenda, of Upper Township, spent a week rebuilding homes in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina.

Still, his crews have had some conflicts with building inspectors. Mirenda said he intervened to save one man's home that federal inspectors marked for demolition. After a few days of hard work, the home was habitable and passed inspection.

Homeowners with the means to do so pay for materials. In other cases, the volunteers rely on donations. The workers use tools, supplies — even trucks — donated by individuals and companies nationwide.

"In 35 years of building, I've never been on a job site that was better equipped. We have everything," he said.

Mirenda spends a week at a time in Mississippi. His wife, Rosemary, takes care of their dogs. The couple has two grown children and two grandchildren.

Mirenda, 56, is a carpenter by trade but is a self-employed

building manager. In Mississippi, he tries to pair the qualifications of the volunteers with the appropriate task.

"We're working really closely with the local code office on mold and mildew remediation. Trying to get some sort of quality of life back for these people," he said.

Mirenda committed one week per month through August. After that, he is not sure what more he will do.

"The scale and scope is unimaginable," he said. "It's just hard to fathom."

Working in Mississippi and in North Carolina after Hurricane Hugo taught him lessons of urgency when it comes to dealing with storms in coastal Cape May County.

"It is humbling. I'll tell you that. My family has a hurricane plan," he said. "Evacuate."