

TRAVEL with PURPOSE

*With voluntourism,
make your next trip count*

Story by Melissa Gaskill

At a Houston Salvation Army warehouse, Melinda Ferrias packs food boxes for Hurricane Harvey victims.





HEALING FROM HARVEY

PEOPLE WHO HELP COMMUNITIES

affected by natural disasters attest that this kind of volunteering offers special returns. It can take you to parts of the state you might not otherwise visit and acquaint you with the local residents who know their communities best. Who better to share tips on gems like hidden parks or under-the-radar diners?

An array of organizations has responded since Hurricane Harvey and its ensuing floods pummeled communities along the Texas coast last August, from Corpus Christi to Beaumont. Three such aid groups are Samaritan's Purse, The Salvation Army, and Convoy of Hope.

The website of Texas Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster makes it possible to sign up to donate time for whichever organization needs volunteers, or to browse a list of organizations and choose one yourself. Some groups have specific requirements; Team Rubicon, for example, takes veterans, first responders, and those with special skills. Through its Operation Hard Hustle, more than 2,000 volunteers have worked to remove debris and repair homes in hurricane-damaged areas.

In Harvey's immediate aftermath, The Salvation Army deployed more than 90 mobile units to affected areas. Clay Steelman, volunteer and training coordinator for the Texas Division, says the organization then shifted into recovery and continues to evaluate needs. Ongoing volunteer

opportunities include sorting and distributing donated supplies at warehouses along the Gulf Coast.

Convoy of Hope, a faith-based humanitarian organization headquartered in Missouri, responds to disasters all over the globe. Spokesman Jeff Nene says the group deployed immediately when Harvey hit and has since moved into Phase 3 of its assistance, with specific activities depending on need.

"We may help rebuild a local park destroyed by flood or continue debris removal, focusing on things that affect the community rather than a specific business or family," Nene says. "We put together community events, like

big neighborhood block parties, free, fun days for those affected where we bring in agencies to help acquaint people who maybe never needed to reach out for help before with places they can get help. We always need volunteers for those."

Samaritan's Purse, another

Opposite page: Downtime at Habitable Spaces, a farm near Seguin. This page: goat care at Habitable Spaces; gutting a flooded home in Pearland; trail-building at Old Tunnel State Park





international faith-based humanitarian aid group, deployed more than 10,000 volunteers in the months following Harvey. The organization then moved into a two- to three-year rebuilding phase, committing to rebuild 1,000 homes in the Houston area, Santa Fe, and Rockport, says Bruce Poss, who served as the group's program manager in Victoria during the disaster-response phase.

"We provide housing for out-of-town volunteers, typically in local churches where they have showers and provide meals," he says. The work usually involves a mix of skilled and unskilled tasks under the direction of a Samaritan's Purse staff member onsite.

Samaritan's Purse asks overnight volunteers to stay a minimum of five days; both teams and individuals are welcome.

BLAZE A TRAIL

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING TRAILS provides lovers of the outdoors a meaningful way to get dirty. Many Texas state parks need volunteers to help with trail work, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department lists opportunities on the volunteer page of its website, says Kris Shipman, volunteer manager. Would-be do-gooders can search by park or type of work, including trail maintenance.

"There is a wide range of opportunities, something for everybody," Shipman says. "A number of parks affected by Hurricane Harvey definitely need help recovering."

Volunteers recently helped build trails at Palmetto, Lake Colorado City,

At Habitable Spaces, a nonprofit farm and artists' residency near Seguin, volunteers can learn about permaculture practices of farming and raising animals.



WORLD WIDE OPPORTUNITIES ON ORGANIC FARMS (WWOOF) LINKS VOLUNTEER WORKERS WITH PLACES TO SPEND A DAY, WEEK, MONTH, OR LONGER LIVING A FARMER'S LIFE.

and Kickapoo Cavern state parks, as well as Government Canyon State Natural Area. "If you have a favorite park, contact them directly, even if you don't see anything online," Shipman suggests.

AmeriCorps places young adults into service positions nationwide with the goal of preparing them for the workforce. Volunteers in Service to America member Brandi Heasley currently organizes volunteers at McKinney Falls State Park in Austin. Individuals can attend regular service days or organize a group and schedule a workday. Park rangers provide the necessary tools and a safety briefing.

"A lot of people just want to work outside or do something new," Heasley says.

The Nature Conservancy of Texas, part of a global organization dedicated to land and water conservation, holds

volunteer workdays on some of its preserves, which often are the only ways for the public to visit these protected lands. That's the case at Love Creek Preserve, a rugged landscape deep in the Hill Country near Medina. Rebecca Neill, the conservancy's Southern Hill Country project manager, puts volunteers to work on a variety of jobs, including maintaining trails that traverse the slopes, canyons, and creek beds. (For more on The Nature Conservancy, see Page 43.)

Volunteers can also pitch in at The Nature Conservancy's Texas City Prairie Preserve, roughly 2,300 acres of coastal prairie along Galveston Bay. On the second Friday of each month, the preserve invites volunteers to help with tasks like removing invasive species, harvesting native seeds, planting marsh grasses, and cleaning up beaches.

HELP NEEDED

For information on volunteering opportunities related to organizations mentioned in the story, explore the following:

Texas Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster: Visit txvoad.communityos.org/cms/home.

The Salvation Army: Visit salvationarmytexas.org or contact Clay Steelman at uss.salvationarmy.org.

Samaritan's Purse: Visit spvolunteernetwork.samaritanaspurse.org/hurricane-harvey-rebuild.

Convoy of Hope: Visit convoyofhope.org or email volunteer@convoyofhope.org.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department: Visit tpwd.texas.gov/volunteer.

Find **Nature Conservancy of Texas** preserves and contact information at nature.org/texas.

World Wide Opportunities On Organic Farms requires a \$40 membership fee to search for participating farms; wwofusa.org.

Habitable Spaces lists information about artist residencies and farm work on its website, habitablespaces.org.

The **Texas Book Festival** is Oct. 27-28 in Austin; texasbookfestival.org/volunteer.

Viva Big Bend music festival is July 26-29 in Alpine, Marfa, Fort Davis, and Marathon; vivabigbend.com.

The **Austin City Limits Music Festival** take place is Oct. 5-7 and Oct. 12-14. For information on volunteering, visit aclfestival.com/information.

DIG IN THE DIRT

SUNSHINE, FRESH AIR, WIDE-OPEN spaces, baby chicks, and funny goats. Ah, life on a farm! World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) links volunteer workers with places to spend a day, week, month, or longer living a farmer's life. Typically, these farms provide room and board for volunteers. About 75 farms in Texas participate, and the work ranges from building chicken coops to weeding crop fields.

Habitable Spaces, a nonprofit sustainable farm and artists' residency near Seguin, accepts WWOOF volunteers. The property looks more like a park than a farm, with a collection of chicken coops, a rabbit hutch, duck pond, and several seasonal vegetable gardens occupying just a few of its 80-plus wooded acres. Housing for volunteers consists of several small cabins and a yurt scattered among the trees, along with a room over the common house, which has indoor and outdoor kitchens, a dining room, and an enormous outdoor fire pit.

The farm practices permaculture, a philosophy of gardening and animal husbandry that's designed to reflect patterns found in nature with practices such as rainwater collection, using rabbit droppings as fertilizer, and composting. The farm also offers workshops on permaculture, and it sells produce, dairy products, chickens, and rabbits to visitors. "Just email us first," co-founder Alison Heinemeier requests.

"We built everything on the space ourselves, so volunteers can get involved with building projects, too," says Heinemeier, who prefers that WWOOF volunteers come for at least a week.

Christina Shane stumbled upon the farm while housesitting in the area and re-evaluating her corporate job in Dallas. "I fell in love with it, being

in touch with how my food is grown, being around artists, the sense of community. I subleased my apartment, took the cat to my sister, and lived at Habitable Spaces for six months." Shane helped build one of the chicken coops and a guest cabin, and she did daily chores such as watering and feeding chickens, guinea fowls, and turkeys.

"It's also learning to be part of a community," Shane says. "Most people don't realize how much work goes into farming or building a structure."

GET YOUR FEST ON

WHATEVER YOUR FAVORITE HOBBY is, you can probably find a festival celebrating it in Texas. We have festivals that focus on everything from music to food, booze, dance, sports, books, films, seasons, and wild creatures. Attending a festival provides a great excuse to travel; even better, festival volunteers get perks such as free admission and the chance to rub elbows with celebrities.

The Texas Book Festival, held annually at the Texas Capitol and other downtown Austin venues each fall, mobilizes more than 1,000 volunteers, says Volunteer and Logistics Coordinator Charley Rejsek. Volunteer opportunities range widely, from shepherding authors to their speaking engagements to managing the book signing area or working in the tents for music and children's activities.

The Texas Book Festival website allows volunteers to note their specific interests and whether they want to be assigned to work with their friends. The entire festival is free, but volunteers get a more involved experience and have the opportunity to meet authors, Rejsek points out. The deadline to volunteer is a week before the event.

Austin resident Laramie R. Stroud has volunteered as a Texas Book



The Love Strength Hope Foundation and Austin Parks Foundation both mobilize volunteers at the Austin City Limits Music Festival.

ATTENDING A FESTIVAL PROVIDES A GREAT EXCUSE TO TRAVEL; EVEN BETTER, FESTIVAL VOLUNTEERS GET PERKS SUCH AS FREE ADMISSION.

Festival monitor inside the Capitol for seven years, starting when he was in college. "You get to be in the Capitol, which is an awesome building, and see sessions without waiting in line," he says. "I've met Robert Caro, Margaret Atwood, and Richard Linklater."

Stroud advises planning out your schedule in advance. "People underestimate how big the festival is. You go through security in the Capitol every single time, so allow for that."

Volunteer Andrea Carrera oversees the crew of volunteers who serve as guides for authors. "If you come from out of town, schedule your shifts so you can take advantage of the rest of the festival—the parties and things like that," she suggests.

Another festival that relies on volunteers is Viva Big Bend Music Festival, an annual showcase of bands

in Alpine, Marathon, Fort Davis, and Marfa. Along with free admission to the shows, volunteers who visit from Texas' big cities get a break from the late-July heat, producer Stewart Ramser says. "It is pleasant here, on average upper 80s in the day and in the 60s at night, and most venues are indoors."

Most Viva Big Bend volunteer duties involve checking wristbands and selling single-show tickets. While area hotel rooms fill up, Ramser says last-minute options always exist, including camping. Viva Big Bend will announce its 2018 band line-up in May, but past acts include The Peterson Brothers, Shinyribs, Butch Hancock, Ruben Ramos, and Joe Ely.

Back in Austin, about 1,000 volunteers contribute to various charitable causes during the two weekends of the gargantuan Austin City Limits Music

Festival at Zilker Park, says Farid Mosher of C3 Presents. Most volunteers get involved through either the Love Hope Strength Foundation, a cancer foundation, or the Austin Parks Foundation. For the past three years, the Love Hope Strength Foundation has organized volunteers to promote its mission of signing up potential bone marrow donors while assisting festival services like greeting fans at the entrance and helping fill water bottles. Meanwhile, Austin Parks Foundation volunteers promote recycling at the festival with information and activities. Typically, volunteers receive free entry to the festival on the day they volunteer, a T-shirt, and refreshments—and, of course, plenty of live music. 🐾

Austin writer Melissa Gaskill has combined her interests in travel and volunteering on numerous occasions—from monitoring sea turtle nests on beaches in Mexico and Guatemala, to cleaning up trails in Texas state parks, and removing hurricane debris in post-Harvey Port Aransas and post-Katrina Mississippi.