

It's Superman!

I remember waiting patiently (or more likely impatiently) for my weekly dose of *Superman* when I was a child. "It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!" Those opening words always excited me. He was my hero. My fascination might have been his X-ray vision, his super strength, or his ability to fly. Perhaps it was his disguise as the mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent with that hat or the predictable change to the man-of-steel in a storage room at the *Daily Planet*. (Despite the hype I cannot recall him ever once using a telephone booth.) But what appealed to me on a deeper level was that he always championed the underdog, got the bad guys, and did it because he could and it was just, not for any reward.

There is no way to chronicle the heart-break I suffered when I learned he was not real, and that neither I, nor anyone else, would ever have superpowers. Reality is sometimes a difficult thing to swallow. But as we grow and mature it becomes obvious we have to work with the powers, strengths, and skills that are innate or that we can develop to help others.

History has shown there are events that far exceed the belief that we might have in our invincibility. With the overwhelming destruction Mother Nature wreaked upon the Gulf states in the form of the recent hurricanes, we have been inundated with disasters that have challenged the heartiest among us. It would have been miraculous to have Superman to offset the "bad guys" or save the world, but he is fictional and was not there to do the things that needed to be done.

We do have within our ranks a number of individuals who have gone beyond just caring

or being empathetic in response to the recent hurricane disasters in the Gulf states, not exactly superheroes but mortals who did what they did because it was the right thing to do. There exists a cadre of individuals who have trained in the skills and services that are afforded in these circumstances by forensic dentists. These are people who have taken time off from their practices, the comforts of home and family, and their busy lives to help others in what has to be a most disheartening task.

There were a number of dental health personnel from California who served on the forensic dentistry team sent to the New Orleans area. They were able to process many of the dead, to help with identifying and cataloging their remains. One positive aspect of this effort was that state-of-the-art equipment was used to efficiently and effectively to do so. Ultimately, these records can be crosschecked with whatever ante mortem data that can be reconstructed to provide names of the deceased. The living conditions including rain, intense heat and humidity, odor, insects, snakes and spiders, and lack of adequate showers and dormitory facilities at the outset made for a less-than-stellar environment. Despite this, the teams worked hard, wearing confining protective suits, and accomplishing much to help in the disaster.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Drs. Susan Bollinger, Stephen Lojeski, Anne Spiegel, Elverne Tonn, and James Wood for the work they have done. These individuals answered the call for help and went with-



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out hesitation to do what they had been trained to do. They accomplished much and helped so many families who likely do not even know who they were.

The ultimate form of charity, it has been said, is giving when the recipient has no idea who is the donor. This group has shown compassion and dedication to doing the right thing under difficult circumstances. The American Dental Association, represented by President Dr. Robert Brandjord; the California Legislature, through Assemblyman Bill Emmerson; and the California Dental Association, honored these individuals with an award at our own House of Delegates in November.

I have long since accepted the fact that superheroes do not exist. But I am happy I do not have to give up the thought that we have many caring individuals who put the welfare of others and the greater good above their own needs. There is little recognition or reward for the things they do other than the self-satisfaction of knowing they are doing a good thing.

We cannot recognize them other than in a ceremonial way. But on behalf of those of us who appreciate their values, and the thousands of our fellow human beings, both dead and alive, who they helped, we are grateful for their efforts. The victims of the hurricanes and their families owe you a great deal of gratitude — as do those of us who did nothing at all. Dentistry appreciates what you have done. The California Dental Association is proud to have you as participants from our state. Thank you for doing the right thing. These individuals did it to get to truth, to provide justice to grieving families, and in the American way. Good work, people. **CDA**