

Community, Alton Road Runners help Colona daughter, flood victims in time of need

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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WOOD RIVER - For years, **Russ and Kathy Colona** have been highly involved in the **Alton Roadrunners Club** and in recent years directed the annual Great River Road Race right after Thanksgiving in Alton.

Recently, **Russ and Kathy's daughter, Rhiannon Schmidt**, was affected in the flood in Baton Rouge, La.

Russ and Kathy Colona had an outpouring of support from area residents to assist Rhiannon. **The Alton Road Runners** not only assisted their daughter, but they sent an abundance of left over T-shirts for people there who had lost the majority of their belongings. Russ and Kathy's church, St. Paul Lutheran in Wood River, had a golf tourney in late September and all the proceeds went to helping their daughter rebuild.

Both Russ and Kathy said they couldn't thank the people of the area enough for their generosity to help their daughter in her time of need.

Russ is also **East Alton-Wood River High School's head cross country and track coach** and has left quite an impact on the athletes who have followed him.

He said it was difficult to see the devastation that occurred in Louisiana.

"What an experience, we spent a day sorting through rubbish looking for important papers, searching stores for supplies," Russ said. "We toured the devastation in the area and waited in line getting food from the Salvation Army. The free things we brought down were highly appreciated and shared by all."

Russ said just seeing the devastation and listening to the sad stories, tugs at a person's heart.

"It's hard to see and hear," he said of the difficulties the people of the area had to endure. "They are strong down here and will make it. It will be a long time before things get better but they will."

Russ and Kathy helped their daughter search through old belongings that were in a trash pile in their front yard. The two said that was one of the most riveting experiences of the entire trip. Rhiannon, a teacher like her father, works in the Baton Rouge area. She also helped care for multiple abandoned cats after the flooding.

Baton Rouge and much of southern Louisiana was devastated by extreme flooding after 20 inches of rain hit the area in a 48-hour period ending the morning of Aug. 13. Thousands of people, animals, and local shelters and rescues were at risk, as no advanced warning was given to evacuate. The federal government declared 20 parishes as major disaster areas, days after the flooding began.

Russ and Kathy said they were absolutely humbled and overwhelmed by the response of their friends, neighbors, their church and the Alton Road Runners Club to help them.

“When we first got the call from our daughter that she was trapped at her house and waiting to be rescued, everyone was praying and asking what can we do to help. It is very humbling to see how concerned everyone is and how willing to help they are,” he said. “We were just telling everyone at our Alton Road Runner meeting what had happened and immediately there was a motion to pay for a U-haul trailer for us to use to take the donations down to her and to donate as many of our past race shirts we have stock piled. Then we were able to go and see her and help others in the area.”

The Alton Road Runners also benefit a charity with some of the proceeds from the Great River Road Race each year. The Road Runners have a running series during the summer for children, along with other special running events.

Mike Cleary and the other Road Runners were ecstatic that something could be done to help Russ and Kathy’s daughter and others in Louisiana.

“It turned out we had a lot of shirts left over the years from races,” Cleary said. “In the past we anguished over those for years on what to do with them and how to channel them somewhere best used for somebody. With my urging, we loaded up a trailer club, paid for the rental and took all the shirts we had down to Louisiana.”

Cleary said from what he was told people were just ecstatic to get those shirts and that meant a lot to the Road Runners. Cleary and a group of raised money on their own for Russ’ daughter to start again, then the church did its part with the golf tourney and more.

“Russ and Kathy are very humble people and don’t want to bring attention to themselves,” Cleary said. “They are wonderful people. Russ said when he was giving away shirts, people came up to him and asked could they have three, because they

barely had any clothing. Russ looked back more than once and said take six if you need them. The shirts we stored all those years ended up being used to help people there and that was amazing.”



