

# Mother Nature doesn't discriminate

Karen Hammer  
looks to pick  
up the pieces

By Sylvia Somerville

SPECIAL TO LARSON NEWSPAPERS

In the slowly fading wake of Hurricane Katrina, some are making sure that those in need aren't forgotten.

The Kunzang Palyul Chöling Buddhist group of Sedona, has started a nonprofit Buddhist relief organization. As part of its effort, the group is hoping to help a few Gulf Coast residents move to Sedona to get back on their feet after Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on their lives.

One of those people is Karen Hammer. In the weeks since Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Hammer has been living in hotels with her declawed Maine Coon cat, first in Mississippi, then in Phoenix.

It's hard to rebuild a life in a hotel room, and Hammer is anxious to make a new start. She is looking for a small town, where people know and care about each other, and where she can pick herself up and begin again.

"I would like to make Sedona my home," she said during a recent visit.

Hammer knew about Sedona because she grew up in Scottsdale. When she was young, Sedona seemed too small and peaceful. Now, these are qualities that she has come to treasure, especially after the emotional and physical stresses of the last few months.

However, she says, "I don't want to be an island unto myself. I want to have a community. I want to be connected and to contribute."

Hammer, a petite dark-haired woman in her 40s, has a gentle, soft-spoken manner and strength of character that has seen her through these hard times. She has no family to rely on and no job to return to in New Orleans.

"I feel Sedona is the place for me," she said.

Hammer discovered Sedona from a notice placed on [www.moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org) by Lucia

## Series

The Kunzang Palyul Chöling Buddhist group of Sedona is currently raising money and awareness to help victims of Hurricane Katrina. Two Gulf Coast residents, specifically, are looking to move to Sedona to get their life back in motion. KPC Sedona is trying to help them.

This is the second in a two-part series on those residents. Today, writer Sylvia Somerville introduces Karen Hammer, a single professional woman from the Gulf Coast looking to get her life back together after the hurricane.

Wednesday, Nov. 23, Somerville introduced 30-year-old single mother of two and her children, Jaycob, 7, and Emalee, 6.

Latimer, a KPC nun. She came to visit and loved what she saw.

"Sedona makes me feel calm," she said. "It has a spiritual quality that I appreciate."

Hammer has a broad business background, including a business administration degree. Earlier in her career, she worked as a fashion model, but she soon moved into international sales.

Hammer lived for several years in Japan and Italy and helped open a textile-design market in Asia.

"I have a good head for business," she said, "and an entrepreneurial spirit."

Hammer ran her own export/import business in New Orleans for a while, but without constant trips to Thailand, it was difficult to make the business work.

Just before Hurricane Katrina, she worked as an office manager for a chain of upscale restaurants. Then the storm wiped out her life.

"I've never been in this situation before," she said.

When Hammer heard a category five hurricane was headed for New Orleans, she took her cat and a few personal items and headed out of town, along with more than a million other people who had to flee.

"I took my laptop and my

clothes because I knew if I had to start over, it would be important to look professional when I went looking for work."

Hammer rode out the hurricane in Hattiesburg, Miss., where she was stranded in a hotel with little food or water. She survived on some MREs, or meals ready to eat, and the food one of the hotel managers was able to bring back from kind-hearted neighbors. One man drove up from Milwaukee, Wis., with water he passed out to refugees.

"What organization are you with?" Hammer recalled asking. "No organization. I just wanted to help."

Hammer was lucky that she had a full tank of gas and that, when the electricity was restored, she could keep on moving.

"I didn't have anywhere to go so I headed West. I looked up some friends in Scottsdale, but they didn't have room for me to stay. So FEMA put me up in a hotel," she said.

Struggling to survive in distressed conditions does leave its mark.

"You get scared. I've never been homeless before," she said. "It could happen to anyone. I am educated, and yet I found myself out on the street."

"It's an unusual situation when people like me in the middle class have to rely on other people so completely."

Hammer is anxious to start anew. She enjoys challenging jobs where she can use her creative skills, but the most important quality is "working with nice people."

She said she can work independently and is extremely resourceful. She is currently completing a course to get a real estate license, which she hopes will expand her job possibilities.

"This could all be a blessing for me in the end," she said. "You just never know where life will lead you."

Hammer's wish list includes a job and an unfurnished, rent-free house in Sedona for six months to a year where she can live with her 5-year-old declawed cat. Hammer was able to salvage some furniture and would like to bring it with her.