



Not one of the 14 doubles titles she's won in her 13-year-career has meant as much to Huber as the help she's provided to displaced families from the Hurricane Katrina disaster.



CLIVE BRUNSKILL, GETTY IMAGES

LIEZEL'S CAUSE

When injury interrupted a golden run in 2005, life seemed grim to Liezel Huber - until the events of Cyclone Katrina in New Orleans gave her a renewed perspective. Now Huber has changed the lives of countless disadvantaged people and is recognised as one of the most generous women in the game.

BY COLIN BANKS

At a time when equal prize money and the burgeoning endorsements of Maria Sharapova are dominating tennis headlines, it is refreshing to come across a story of one player's goodwill and charitable gift to the devastated victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Liezel Huber should have been riding high on the back of her first Grand Slam title last August, having claimed the Wimbledon doubles trophy alongside Cara Black. But the Houston-based South African was sitting leg elevated in her Texan home when news first broke of the devastation that was being inflicted on New Orleans and surrounding areas.

Cut off in her prime, the 29-year-old was being forced to spend six months on the sidelines after cruelly injuring her knee in a World Team Tennis match a mere four days after she had held the Wimbledon trophy aloft.

"I was really down and depressed and wondering why it had happened to me," Huber admits. "Then the hurricane hit and I thought 'shame on me. Here I am pitying myself. It's just a knee.'

"How could I feel sorry for myself? All these people had lost everything and their homes, and here was I sitting in my five bedroom house with its own cinema. Who actually needs a home cinema anyway?"

Beginning on 29th August last year, Hurricane Katrina waged a deadly three day war on the coastlines of Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, causing over \$US75 billion worth of damage and claiming the lives of over 2,000 people. Thousands more are still missing. But it was in New Orleans, a city drowned in flood water, that the greatest damage was caused, resulting in thousands of families being de-camped to neighbouring cities such as Houston as if they were war refugees.

As the drama unfolded on TV screens across the world, Huber's Christian conscience drove her into action. A simple email sent out to her fellow players and friends asking for help began her journey of discovery. The first response was an emphatic vote of confidence from good friend and current doubles partner Martina Navratilova.

"Martina gave us a \$US10,000 donation straight away. She trusted me 100 percent to use it directly with the families. That was overwhelming," recalls Huber.

Navratilova, like many of her peers, is full of praise for the work carried out by Liezel and husband Tony in the months that followed. Her work was also recognised with the WTA's Humanitarian Award earlier this year.

"Liezel stretched the dollar a long way. She is very efficient and

very smart, so I knew it was the best money I could spend," said Navratilova. "It's amazing what can be done when people try."

Others heard the call for help. A succession of players sent donations and asked what else they could do to assist.

"People I didn't know really surprised me, like the French player Nathalie Dechy. I barely knew her, but she gave \$ US2,000 and lots of Lacoste clothing she got from her sponsor," added Huber.

"Jennifer Capriati sent me a cheque with a note saying 'let me know if you need anymore'."

With money pouring in from all corners of the globe, so began 'Liezel's Cause', a charity designed for the victims, with all proceeds going directly to the affected families.

"We use people's money 100 percent as we have no admin costs as it's just me and my husband working. We also got a lot of gas cards and food cards donated as well as clothes, food, furniture, and

even pots, pans and toys. We got so much stuff that we had to build shelves in our garages to hold everything."

With relief, both financial and material, flooding into the Huber residence, the pair set about trying to turn the resources they had into tangible aid.

"Some shelters that were run by the big organisations would not even let us through the door. That was so difficult. We even waited in parking lots, handing out our number and asking them to contact us if they needed help," she recalls.

Eventually one of the churches called her back and said they had three families that needed help. The first recipient of the Huber generosity was a 59-year-old named only as Alonia.

"I couldn't understand it. I thought people would be crying and blaming others, but she was so positive and thankful to us. She had lost everything including her house and possessions," recalls Huber. "I immediately called my husband and told him we had to help these people."

"We started renting apartments in Houston for them. If it meant we went without something, then that was OK, so we told them we could afford to pay for everything for them for three months and that's what happened. The work and the fundraising continued though and we are still helping them today."

After almost a year dispossessed in Houston, Alonia and her family finally made the journey back to New Orleans at the end of July. 'Liezel's Cause' has been helping them since that first meeting.

Over 21 families have now been helped by the charity such as the Riggeltons, the Wrights and the Jenkins. Every facet of their lives, from accommodation to schooling and helping them find jobs in

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Houston, has been part of Huber's mission. With areas of New Orleans now largely habitable again, they will also help repatriate those who want to return to their former homes.

"I never thought it would ever get this big. I thought we could help a few families, but we just had to keep going as there was a need to help so many more."

Running a charity is a full time job, but with the help of modern technology, it's something that Liezel fits into her daily schedule or playing, practising and training.

"Now that I am back playing again, I keep in touch with all the families while on the road. We have cell phones and email, so if anything urgent happens then people can contact me. I only play about six hours a day, so I have plenty of time to help people. If I could, I would work on it 24 hours a day."

Since her return in January, Huber has notched up two doubles titles in Bangalore with Sania Mirza and in Strasbourg with Navratilova. She has reached a further four finals and remains a permanent fixture in the doubles top 20.

Despite being one of the most touching and inspiring stories to come out of tennis in recent years, Liezel has been disappointed with the lack of publicity from the WTA Tour, who could use the example to highlight the human interest of their players.

"We were there hands on doing it as the two of us are the charity, so we didn't get any time to get publicity. The WTA has the big players to promote, so they didn't seem too interested in what we were doing, although we did get some personal donations from people who work there and one from Larry Scott (CEO of the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour)."

Not one to rest on her laurels, Liezel is already planning her next



MIKE HEWITT, GETTY IMAGES

Huber's life would change dramatically after winning Wimbledon 2005 with Cara Black – although not in the way she'd imagined.

mission. Having set a deadline on her playing career, she is already planning the next stage of her life by helping a run-down school in her native Durban in South Africa.

"It's a huge project and will cost about 1 million Rand. Between the foundation and my parents, we are going to fund it. We are giving some money from 'Liezel's Cause' and some from my prize money and the rest we will raise. There are currently 80 kids to a class, so we have to help them."

"I'm hoping to play for the USA in the 2008 Olympics as I get my American citizenship in the next year. After that I want to adopt kids, work with the under privileged and devote myself to charity."

Donations can be made at www.liezelscause.com

The Grace in the Game

Liezel Huber is not the only player to perform generous off-court acts. Check out other charitable players in our Top Ten on page 130.

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