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The Town Focus page for Julian, Borrego Springs and surrounding areas appears Wednesdays. Send Datebook listings 14 days in advance to [cheryl.walker@uniontrib.com](mailto:cheryl.walker@uniontrib.com) or Cheryl Walker, The San Diego Union-Tribune, 800 W. Valley Parkway, Suite 114, Escondido, CA 92025. For story suggestions, contact Julie Pendray four weeks in advance at [julie.pendray@uniontrib.com](mailto:julie.pendray@uniontrib.com).

# Tour guide driven to be Red Cross volunteer

By Ruth Lepper

BORREGO SPRINGS — Joe Raffetto had to put his business on hold for two months when the American Red Cross asked him to go to Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina.

Raffetto, owner of California Overland Desert Excursions, was in New Jersey visiting his parents when the hurricane hit the Gulf Coast in late August. He headed for Mississippi on Aug. 27.

His final destination was Waveland, a small town in the southernmost part of the state with a population of less than 7,000.

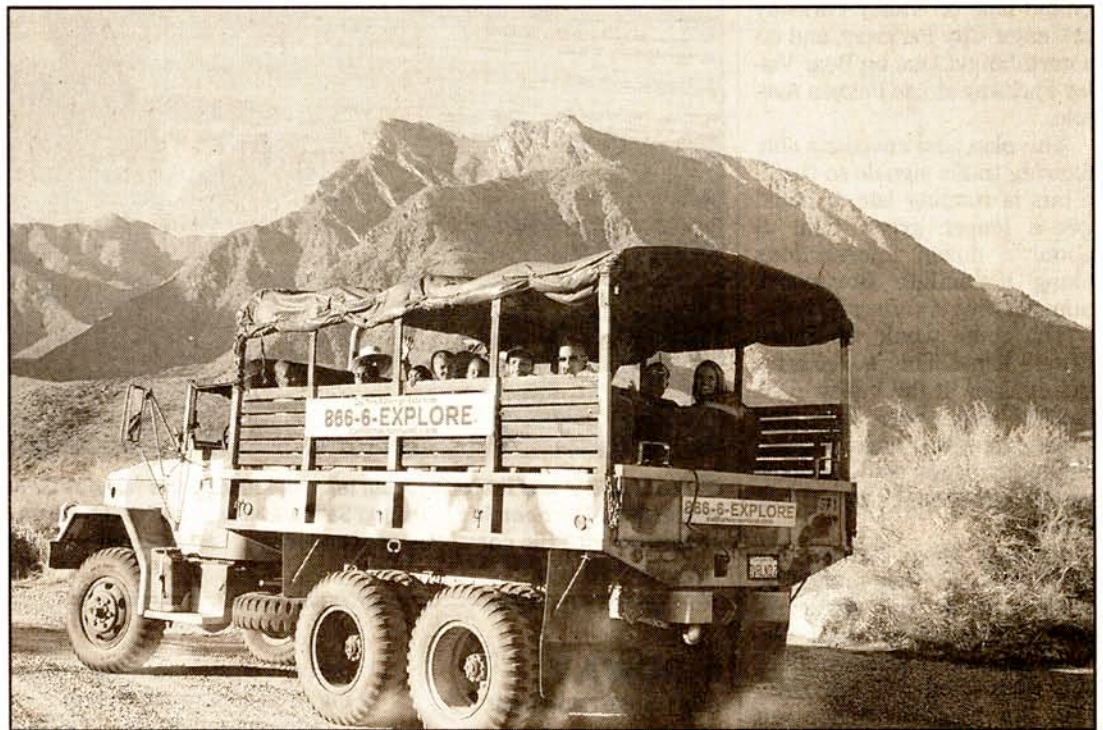
Raffetto's job was to drive an emergency response vehicle. His team, the first Red Cross unit to arrive in Waveland, was warned about what to expect.

"It's just hard to believe it was the United States," Raffetto said. "Trees had come down. Some houses had five or six trees landing on top of them. ... There were cars piled up on the highway. There were literally hundreds of houses washing across the highway, sitting on the road or over on the shoulder, sitting upside down or sitting on top of other houses."

Among the devastation, he saw neighbors helping neighbors.

One man had a convenience store that was still intact. He kept the store open, providing food and supplies at no charge.

"He was just a wonderful guy," Raffetto said. "He had managed to get hold of (bottled) water. Church groups had brought in food and clothing. ... Neighbors would come and take what they needed."



A California Overland Excursions tour took off from Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Visitor Center. Joe Raffetto, the tour company's owner, went to Mississippi after Katrina. *Courtesy photo*

Raffetto, 47, has been a volunteer with the national American Red Cross for three years, signing on after the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York City. He was living in New Jersey at that time and working in advertising in Manhattan.

It was about that time, while attending a friend's wedding in Massachusetts, that Raffetto noticed a tour group traveling on an amphibious vehicle. That gave him an idea.

"I thought that was a neat way to make a living," he said. "If I was to do something like that, I'd want to show people Anza-Borrego Desert. ... I came up with the name of (my) company just sitting there."

Raffetto operates California

Overland Desert Excursions out of Borrego Springs.

He lived in San Diego several years ago, working on a government program that dealt with the protection of whales and dolphins. He often would go to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in his free time. He said it was nice to listen to silence.

Raffetto wanted to provide a way for visitors to experience desert areas that are difficult to reach.

He revamped two military troop carriers and installed school bus-type seats, complete with seat belts. The open bed of each Dodge truck carries 16 passengers.

California Overland Desert Excursions had its first tour in April, driving to Font's Point

in the late afternoon to watch the sunset.

Other destinations include Borrego Badlands, 17 Palms Oasis, Clark Dry Lake, Coyote Canyon, Coach Whip Canyon, San Felipe Wash, Hawk Canyon and Palo Verde Wash.

Raffetto offers day trips and overnight camping in the desert throughout the year. Julian and backcountry wine-tasting tours were added during the summer.

California Overland Desert Excursions is at 1233 Palm Canyon Drive, Borrego Springs. For more information, Raffetto can be reached at (866) 839-7567 or through [www.californiaoverland.com](http://www.californiaoverland.com).

Ruth Lepper is a freelance writer in Ramona.