

New Orleans Relief Effort: How A College Educated An Alumnus

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The worst part of having my car broken into and laptop stolen was missing an email from Dickinson College announcing a student/alumni Katrina rebuild-mission trip to New Orleans. It filled up in 57 minutes. Because of the San Francisco Interfaith Council's (SFIC) extensive work in disaster preparedness, I felt that firsthand experience would be beneficial. My name was put on a waiting list, during which time I made several gentle inquiries. A week and a half prior to the trip I got the call and went into action.

Flying above the Gulf Coast, the darkness of the oil-polluted waters from the recent uncontrollable BP spill was my welcome mat to New Orleans. For the duration of the stay, newspaper front pages were dominated by stories of the spill and frustration at the slow and ineffective response.

From May 24 – May 29, home was NOLA's Trinity Methodist Church. Post Katrina, this water damaged religious facility was converted into a recovery station. The sanctuary, filled with building supplies, became a makeshift *Home Depot*. Classrooms were crammed with bunk beds and the kitchen became ground zero for chow and fellowship.

Three teams of nine, each led by a "Bonner" Student Leader, were assigned cooking and cleanup duty and were the cogs that made life in this spartan setting work. Participants brought their own mess kits and an assigned kitchen supply, so as to minimize unnecessary refuse. Vans driven in from Dickinson, carted teams to and from the jobsites.

Rising with the chickens, after a quick breakfast, we made sack lunches then loaded coolers and building supplies onto the vans. Thanks to the portable GPS we were able to reach our destinations. With the common bond of our alma mater, we put the best that Dickinson taught us into action. Team spirit emerged organically and instantaneously. What we lacked in construction experience, we compensated in zeal, creativity and sweat! The roller coaster days spanned from watching paint dry to surges of energy, as seemingly impossible time sensitive tasks demanded every bit of adrenaline we could muster. Trying to conquer the logistics and execution of dry-walling a small bathroom, exercising muscles I didn't know I had and inhaling work dust, were all firsts for this neophyte "Bob the Builder!"

What kept us grounded and on track was interaction with the homeowners and neighbors. Their remarkable stories of perseverance five years after Katrina, living in these flood damaged dwellings without working plumbing and electricity, losing loved ones and community, was the sobering reality which recalled us to our mission. Intermittently, children would appear wanting to help or distract us from the tasks at hand with invitations to toss a football. Elderly neighbors, sympathetic with our heat fatigue would offer cold bottles of water. All the time, these Katrina victims never lost hope or humor.

Our routine wrapped up after dinner in the sanctuary with reflections of the day's highs and lows. It's been 27 years since graduating from Dickinson. With that perspective I was amazed at the intellectual caliber, social conscience, and selfless desire to serve engrained in the undergrads I dubbed, "Bright Young Things." An unexpected surprise was meeting four alums from San Francisco, who've become instant chums.

In addition to the workdays, we spent our last afternoon touring the hardest hit "Lower 9th Ward." Perched on the site of the levy break and looking at the slabs where humble homes once stood before being washed away, countless folk waited for rescue on top roofs, and numerous lives perished, I could not help but feel that I was standing on sacred ground. The few Brad Pitt "Make It Right Foundation" eco-friendly homes, slow to rise, made one wonder if the rest of the country had all but forgotten about the plight of these struggling souls. Greatest hope came when hearing from a "Teach For America" faculty member, who walked us through the labyrinth of module classrooms at the nearby G.W. Carver High School. It was then and there that the resilience of NOLA teachers and students became most apparent.

No trip to NOLA is complete without wandering the French Quarter and taking a trolley ride through the Garden District. Strangely, visiting those places, seemingly unharmed by Katrina, was a stark reminder of the racial and economic inequity of New Orleans. The opening lines of the Charles Dickens, Tale of Two Cities, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," seemed best to characterize that demographic divide.

As my plane touched down at SFO, I wondered whether we San Franciscans, living at the precipice of an earthquake, would endure a like disaster with the fortitude, patience and grace of the folk I'd met in New Orleans. If nothing else, this trip inspired hope in the potential of the human

spirit to meet any challenge. Likewise, as in other philanthropic endeavors, this well intentioned volunteer left enriched and touched by the souls he came to help.

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