

Reflections from Katrina

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A group of 39 students, faculty and staff from William Jewell College traveled to New Orleans over fall break to assist with hurricane relief efforts. Students departed October 14 for the five-day trip, which was sponsored by the college's Christian Student Ministries and American Humanics organizations, in partnership with the American Red Cross and Baptist Disaster Services. They were headquartered in Algiers, La. The Jewell group assisted in residential clean-up efforts aimed at allowing displaced hurricane victims to return to their homes.

A surreal moment occurred on our recent disaster services trip to the Gulf Coast. One morning as we traveled into downtown New Orleans off of the badly damaged 10 Highway over Lake Ponchartraine, our radio was turned up loudly (as college students like it), and a song came on called "Rock You Like a Hurricane" by the Scorpions. As the students started to sing along we came over a rise in the highway, and there before us was the New Orleans Superdome. At that sobering moment, singing didn't seem quite so appropriate, and we questioned why the station even chose to play the song. What we soon realized was that all of our worlds would be "rocked" by the devastation we encountered following Hurricane Katrina.

Having lost my family home to an F-5 tornado in Andover, Kansas, in 1991 and having worked disaster relief in other tornados (including the Liberty tornado of 2003), as well as various floods and ice storms over the years, I thought I had seen the worst. I soon realized that the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and Rita was the Kansas City tornado of 2003 multiplied by one million. No camera lens is wide enough to tell the story and capture the vastness of the devastation. No reporter has a large enough vocabulary to describe the scene. The damage and destruction extends as far as the eye can see for what seems hundreds of miles. Seeing firsthand the damage in New Orleans and the surrounding communities made me envision the 1983 movie "The Day After," which was about an atomic bomb dropped in Kansas City.

The work that our William Jewell College students and faculty completed for the residents of New Orleans was called "Mud Out." This term referred to the process of clearing out all the contents of family homes, including the sheet rock and insulation. At the Red Cross and Baptist Relief Services headquarters in Slidell, Louisiana, we would get our "Mud Out" assignments for the day. We worked in crews of 5-6, and each day we never knew what we were going to face. But we quickly figured out that we were going to be tested physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

We were meeting people at the lowest points of their lives, and we had very few answers for them. Each person we met had a sad story to share. These were the elderly, the

families, and the children. For my crew, each day seemed to get progressively worse in terms of challenging assignments.

As we traveled through the city to find out our “Mud Out” assignment, we became well-versed in reading landmarks and asking questions because most every street sign was gone. We also learned what the large red X spray-painted on houses signified. The top number in the middle of the X represented the fire fighter who went through the house, and the bottom number in the middle of the X was the number of bodies found there. The largest number a member of our crew saw was a six.

On our final day of doing “Mud Out” work, we met a grandmother named Carolyn outside of her home. As we introduced ourselves to Carolyn, who was a server in a deli, she shared with us how she and her grandson had been rescued from her home by a firefighter during the flooding caused by Hurricane Rita. The house had severe structural and water damage, including a large tree through the top of one of the bedrooms in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. But Carolyn and her grandson continued to live there until their life was rocked for a second time by Rita. She told us they had not been in their house since the flood 30 days earlier, and that they were staying with family in Mississippi.

When we opened the door to the house, we encountered a foul stench from mold and stagnant water that had been left standing in the home. As we moved through the dark and dank house wearing respirators and masks, we saw furniture, beds, carpet, and walls with mold growing all over them. We all knew that we didn’t have a large enough crew to take on this task and radioed for back-up help. But we soon realized that no help was coming, and if anyone was going to help out this woman and move her toward recovery, it was going to be us.

We first opened up all of the windows in the house and then carried all of the furniture to the street. Then we emptied cabinets and closets of clothes. After furniture was removed, we began the task of taking out all of the carpet and hardwood floors. The cockroaches and maggots in the kitchen and throughout the house were large and rampant. With the carpet removed, we could move on to pulling all of the sheetrock and insulation out of the house. Our goal was to get the house down to the 2x4 studs so it could dry out and be ready for a rebuild sometime in the future.

As we moved through the house we empathized with Carolyn, who was struggling with seeing all of her life’s possessions being carried to the street in one large pile. She wanted to keep her kitchen cabinets, but I had to tell her that they must go, as they were covered in mold and were a health hazard. We were able to salvage a few personal items that we helped her pack up in boxes.

As we were there her insurance agent arrived and walked through the house with her, surveying the extensive damage. We heard him tell her the heart-breaking news that she had no flood insurance—only property insurance. Once again we experienced an overwhelming sense of inadequacy to alleviate this woman’s pain and suffering. As we

continued to work, we grew more tired from the physical labor. But we developed a renewed feeling of resolution to make this house as livable as possible before we had to load up our vans and make the 15-hour drive home to Liberty. We knew that whatever condition we left the house in it was likely to remain that way for months—if not years—until the rebuild could begin. So in each room we made sure to sweep and clean up all of the debris and sheet rock remnants, realizing that Carolyn would most likely be living in the home until it was rebuilt, as opposed to living in a tent in her yard like so many other people were.

As our work day came to an end we reminded her to spray a bleach-water solution on all of the studs and floors to kill the mold and open her home up during the day to air it out. Carolyn cried as we all gave her a hug as we walked out. The only words I could say to her were “God Bless You,” which somehow seemed inadequate. But I knew that we had given her our very best and that we had totally exceeded what we thought was possible to achieve when we started the day. Her house was now wide open with light shining all the way through the walls and studs from the windows in each room. There was now light in what had been a dark and dreary home, and that light represented hope, which we all needed after this most intense disaster relief trip.

As we got back in the van for the trip home, we came to some realizations. We recognized that we had a moral obligation to go back and tell others of the incredible need that exists for workers in New Orleans. This need will last for years to come. There are all kinds of needs, but there is a special place for college students and young adults who have the physical stamina and drive to do the kind of back-breaking work that is so needed. The people of the Gulf Coast are facing problems that need a human touch, problems that can't be solved by heavy machinery and equipment alone. We also realized that there is probably not enough lumber or sheetrock in all of North America to rebuild what has been lost.

The trip affirmed for us that the American Red Cross is an amazing organization that needs all of our support and financial resources to do the work that they do so well. The people of New Orleans have suffered greatly, but the human spirit is incredibly resilient. Some way, somehow, they will rebuild and get back on with their lives, even though it will likely be years away. As relief workers we felt incredibly inadequate, yet also empowered to help solve the problems before us. In the end we did walk away with a sense of accomplishment in helping our neighbors in New Orleans. We had given them all we had over a period of four days, no matter how small the impact of our endeavors might have seemed to us.