

Reflections from Katrina

Story by Kevin Shaffstall, Director of Pryor Leadership Studies and American Humanics

A surreal moment happened on our recent Hurricane disaster relief trip to New Orleans. 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 to the popular song we came over a rise in the highway and there before us was the New Orleans Superdome. At that moment singing along didn’t seem quite so appropriate and we questioned why the station even chose to play the song. What we soon realized is that all of our worlds would be “rocked” by the devastation we encountered following Hurricane Katrina.

Having lost our 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), floods, and ice storms I thought I had seen the worst. Soon I realized that the devastation left from 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 seem hundreds of miles. Seeing 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 our William Jewell College American Humanics, Christian Student Ministries students, and faculty completed for the residents of New Orleans was called “Mud Out”. This meant clearing out all the contents of family homes including the sheet rock and insulation. We would go to the Red Cross and Baptist Relief Services headquarters in Slidell, Louisiana and 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 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 had very few answers for them. Each person we met had a sad story to share. These were the elderly, families, and 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 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 in the house. The largest number a member of our crew saw was a 6.

On our final day of doing “Mud Out” work we met a grandmother outside of her home by the name of “Carolyn”. As we introduced ourselves to Carolyn whose occupation 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 because 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 staying with family in Mississippi.

When we opened the door to the house what we encountered was a foul stench and smell from mold and stagnant water that had been standing in the home. As we moved through the dark and dank house with respirators and masks on we saw furniture, beds, carpet, and walls with mold growing all over them. We all knew we didn't have a large enough crew to take on this task and radioed for back-up help but 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 and then emptied cabinets and closets of clothes. After furniture was removed we then moved on to 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 going to the street in one large pile. She wanted to keep her kitchen cabinets but I had to tell her that they must go because they were covered in mold and were a health hazard. There were a few personal items we were able to help her pack up in boxes that may have been salvageable.

As we were there her insurance man showed up and walked through the house with her and we heard him tell her the heart breaking news that she had no flood insurance and only property insurance. Once again we felt like we had no answers for her and only felt more inadequate to alleviate this woman's pain and suffering. As we continued to work we grew more tired from the physical labor but developed more resolve to have this house as livable as possible before we had to load up our vans and make the 15 hour drive home to Liberty, MO. We knew whatever condition we left the house in that 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 up and clean up all of the debris and sheet rock remnants realizing that she would most likely be living in the home until the house was rebuilt versus 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 we had given her our very best and totally exceeded what we thought was possible 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 was a dark and dreary home and the light represented hope which we all needed after this most intense disaster relief trip.

As we got in the van and knew we had a 15 hour trip ahead of us back to Liberty, Missouri 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 in New Orleans for workers. 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 and problems they face need a human touch that can’t be solved by heavy machinery and equipment. 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 confirmed to 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 human spirit is incredibly resilient and that the people of New Orleans have suffered greatly but somehow, somehow will rebuild and get back on with their lives even though it will likely be years away. As relief workers we felt incredibly inadequate but not powerless to solving all of the problems we faced. In the end we did walk away with a sense of accomplishment in helping our neighbors in New Orleans, knowing that we had given them all we had over a period of 4 days, not matter how small the impact of our endeavors.