

REFLECTIONS OF A STUDENT'S JOURNEY TO NEW ORLEANS

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The following are the author's reflections and opinions of his experience volunteering in New Orleans with L.I.N.K., a campus ministry program, just six months after Hurricane Katrina.

After several bake sales, a few 50/50 raffles, and the acquisition of some very generous donations, the departure day arrived. It was a beautiful afternoon and everyone was excited to get on the road for our 20-hour journey. As we loaded up the vehicles, we put a sign on the back of one truck: "Lourdes College, Sylvania, Ohio, Habitat for Humanity - New Orleans." We said good-bye to family, friends, and those from the college community who came to wish us well and give us strength for the next week. For some, this was their first trip away from home. For others, it was a chance to get away for a small vacation. For me, it was another trip on the road of adventure. However, this time it was co-ed, no drugs, and for a great cause.

The drive to and from New Orleans was probably a typical road trip. We joked, fought over what CD's to play, and had deep conversations on the trip down about what we thought it would be like. The conversations on the way back were about what we had just experienced. However, about two hours outside of our destination, something started to look a bit odd to me and the others in our vehicle. I was looking at some wooded land that appeared to be cleared for new homes to be built. Yet, I saw no equipment or signs, and the land was cleared in "pockets." As we continued to drive for another half an hour, it became clearer that we had reached the outer lines of the hurricane. As we began to get closer, we noticed trees bent over, if not uprooted, from the power of the winds that had blown through just six months earlier. Coming down the highway into the city of Slidell, Louisiana, I was in disbelief. This is

the only way I can describe how I felt at this moment.

When you have someone you love or care about and they are very sick and you know they are going to die, you prepare yourself for their death. However, when they die, you still are not prepared or ready for it. I knew I was coming to New Orleans to see devastation; I had seen the footage on TV. I was up on current events. I knew what was going on. I even wrote a letter to Mayor Nagin after I saw him give an interview one Sunday morning. I offered him my support and let him know that Lourdes College was coming down to help rebuild one of America's greatest cities. I thought I knew what to expect. I was not prepared to see shopping centers on both sides of the road closed and boarded up with parking lots full of trash. Huge marquee signs inviting people from the highway to eat, sleep, or shop at their establishments were blown out, twisted, bent over or destroyed. Blue tarps covered almost every rooftop. Hotels were closed. Other than the traffic on the road, there was no sign of life, let alone any indication of a clean-up or rebuilding effort. As we came down Interstate 10 to the bridge to cross over Lake Pontchartrain, both sides of the road were covered with litter including lawn chairs and coolers. We were on the same road where people had been stuck in traffic trying to escape the disaster. As stunned as I was, little did I know it would only get worse.

One of the things that we take for granted is organization. Even if our personal lives may seem a bit disorganized, our surroundings are still orderly. Just imagine if the city or town where you live, and that you know so well,

suddenly had no traffic lights, stop signs, speed limit signs, one-way street signs, or street names. You may know where you are, but what about all the people around you who don't? Just think if you were in a strange city and you had to be somewhere at a certain time. This is the situation we found ourselves in on our way to orientation for Habitat for Humanity at Loyola University in New Orleans. As we drove towards Loyola we learned very quickly that all corners are four-way stops. If we saw the name of a street we had to make a note of it; it might come in handy later.

Since orientation was considered our first day of work and only lasted half a day, we were able to walk around the French Quarter for the rest of the day to see some of the popular sites of New Orleans. The area where Mardi Gras had happened just a week prior to our arrival was still a mess. The media portrayed Mardi Gras as a symbol that New Orleans was back to "normal." The portrayal could not have been further from the truth. Many stores and restaurants were still closed due to the damage they had sustained from Katrina. Yet, the media suggested that the situation was no longer as bad as it had been six months ago. When we looked in the windows of some of these businesses, we could see the watermarks on the walls as well as the damage that had occurred inside. Again I was in disbelief of the destruction, and still I had not seen the worst.

The next morning as we headed to our work site, we began to see more of the outlying areas of New Orleans, which resembled much of what we had witnessed on the way in. Our first day of real labor was to clean out a section of a warehouse that a hospital had donated to Habitat for Humanity. This was to be used as a center for all the building supplies that would be used to help get people back home. Upon arriving at the job site, we had a difficult time finding a place to park because the parking lot was used as a commuter parking area for people who were taking the bus to work. Once inside the warehouse, we saw a great pile of trash that looked like a garbage dump and given two very large dumpsters. We were told that when they were filled, we could call and someone would come to empty them. We filled

the trailer-sized dumpsters within two hours, then learned that no one would come and empty them. Fortunately, while we were emptying the warehouse, our site supervisor went to get some tools. Also during this time, a supply of 4x8 sheets of plywood and a number of 2x4's were delivered to the site. The lumber was to be used to build shelves to hold supplies. Throughout the week we found out that supplies were difficult to obtain; people could not just go to Home Depot, so it seemed that it might take quite a while to fill those shelves to provide for job sites in need of supplies.

After working at the warehouse for half the day, we ran out of materials to build any more shelves. As a result, we were told we could leave and report to our next job the following day. The day before, I had gone into the Quarter while others viewed the Lower Ninth Ward where Katrina hit the hardest. On this day I decided to use my free time to travel to the Ninth Ward. On the way to the Ninth Ward, a lady pulled up beside us thanking us for coming down to help (she had seen the sign on the back of the truck) and to tell us "God Bless." This was repeated as the week went on.

When we pulled into the Lower Ninth Ward and drove down the main street, my heart sank into my stomach. There was devastation as far as our eyes could see. Homes were in the middle of the streets; toys and dolls—including a Big Wheel—were in the trees that were still standing. Fallen trees were lying all over the place. Neighborhood churches were destroyed, with pews flipped over on top of each other. Even most of the cars we saw were on anything but four tires. We even saw a boat that had landed in the front half of a house. All of this was in the first several blocks. I was witnessing the most disturbing scene in my life; and I can assure you that my life has been quite eventful.

When we returned to the church, everyone began to take a shower and get ready for dinner. I went outside and called my dad. My mind was so scrambled. I told my dad about what I had witnessed and expressed my concern about how things were down in New Orleans. I told him that I was not sure if I

even wanted to return home because the need for assistance was overwhelming. He was very supportive of my feelings, but added that I should think things over for the next couple of days before making a final decision. After our conversation, I sat down alone outside and reflected on the trip to this point. Some fellow students came out to check on me to see how I was doing and to offer their support while I took in the enormity of it all. I went in to get a plate for dinner and returned outside so I could attempt to put things into perspective. As I ate the little bit of food from my plate tears ran down my face. It was so hard for me to deal with the thought of people not stepping up to help others who were living in tents. Although it was only March it was getting warmer, and bugs were starting to return faster than the people who were displaced from their homes. I couldn't grasp the fact that some people were safe in their homes not doing anything to help others. Seeing the amount of destruction, I knew those extremely hot and humid days were only a few months away and there were people who would be unable to escape the heat for any comfort while they slept and lived in their tents.

As I sat there feeling despondent, Sr. Barb Vano, our advisor, came out to see how I was. During our conversation, she repeated everything my dad had said to me; she emphasized that the devastation was of great magnitude and that I would do more good by returning home and letting others know what was really happening down in New Orleans. Sr. Barb was very consoling and of great comfort. To this day I am very grateful for the guidance she gave me, not only that day but since then as well. Because of her and my dad, I have worked to inform others of my experience in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

On our final day we worked in the Musicians Village, an area funded by Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis, celebrity musicians who came from this area. They believed that the revitalization of New Orleans would come through the music and musicians that make New Orleans what it is. This part of the project focused on building several new homes for area musicians and a neighborhood

community center. The day was truly groundbreaking. Some people helped dig areas around what would be the foundations of the new homes. Others painted the trim that would go inside houses. The rest of us bagged up dirt and sod that had been placed in huge piles. We must have filled a hundred contractor-size trash bags. Once this task was completed, our mission in New Orleans had come to an end.

There were many frustrating moments on the trip. For example, each day we would come back to the church where we stayed in Metairie and see people working on the road. On the side of this road was a sign that read "Road Repair \$6 million." As I looked around this area, none of the roads appeared to be in very bad condition. I understand how governmental budgets work; if money is designated for one such purpose it presumably cannot be used for other reasons. Yet when people not even ten miles away are sleeping in tents, is road repair really a top priority?

Yet, in the middle of frustration were signs of hope. If it were not for the church in which we stayed, one family would not have been given a FEMA trailer. The family explained that the church jumped through multiple "flaming hoops" to allow the trailer to sit on the church property. This prevented having another empty FEMA trailer. FEMA claimed that there were no more trailers available because they were all "stuck in the mud." Here is an idea: pull them out of the mud and put them in the parking lots of the empty department stores. Create trailer cities with portable showers and port-a-potties so people can be much more comfortable than in tent city!

Based on my experience, I believe that the "blame game," red tape, and disorganization are in full force with respect to the government's actions in New Orleans. No one is willing to suggest any ideas because, if they are wrong, they will be fired. So instead of even building on the smallest success, it becomes a "pass the buck" system.

In August of 2006, I was in a hotel in Washington D.C. On the bottom of the TV screen scrolled the results of a study that had been conducted about people who had been affected by Hurricane Katrina. It stated that

those who left pre-Katrina and went to Alabama or Georgia were better off than those who were displaced after Katrina and shipped to Houston or San Antonio. Did we really need a study to know this? How much money was spent on this research that could have aided those who were not doing so well? Why do we continue to turn our heads?

As a dedicated sports fan, I love to find the stadiums and arenas of the area sports teams when I travel, so I was looking forward to visiting the Superdome during our visit. As we drove into New Orleans after our twenty-hour drive from Sylvania, I saw the home of the New Orleans Saints still damaged from Hurricane Katrina six months earlier. In spite of the damage I had been viewing for over the past 100 plus miles, a bit of rivalry pride came over me. A banner on the side of the Superdome read "The Saints Return Home September 24, 2006," and I noted that they would be playing against my favorite football team, the Atlanta Falcons. I immediately started to "trash talk" saying, "It's not good that they scheduled their first home game as a big loss." Unfortunately for us Falcons fans, just the opposite happened. The Falcons got caught up in the hype of the Saints and all their fans on that Monday night in September. The Superdome was rocking with excitement and the Saints beat the Falcons. These fans were pumped! It was the complete opposite of what took place in the Superdome a year earlier, when people were living in the stadium with no running water for drinking or bathing, no ventilation, no working toilets, and no food or medical supplies. Imagine if the Saints' fans had been deprived of these basic necessities after paying enormous ticket prices and other costs to be at the Superdome.

I remember watching a morning news show that reunited two people who had never met before their time being stranded in this "hellhole." One of the women had diabetes and was going into diabetic shock because she had no insulin. The other woman started yelling and going up to people to see if anyone else had any insulin. Because the second woman didn't sit around, the first woman's life was spared and she was able to live through this tragedy. This was just a small piece of the

tragedy. Mix in rapes and assaults, and you have the real disaster of Hurricane Katrina. Then, as the roads dried, people began to be bused on a one-way ticket out of New Orleans, sometimes separating families that had managed to stay together.

The morning after the Falcons-Saints game, I was listening to ESPN radio when host Mike Greenberg stated that the people at the game were not the people who were trapped there a year ago. A guest on the show, Hall of Fame football player (and former coach of the New Orleans Saints) Mike Ditka, repeated the thoughts of Mike Greenberg and my own ideas. Ditka added that although the downtown area was looking better, just across the bridge the Lower Ninth Ward still looked as if Hurricane Katrina had hit yesterday. Coach Ditka's comments still haunt me. I keep wondering about the fact that the supposedly most powerful person in the world, the President of the United States of America, flew over this scene just days after it happened. He then stood on the ground a few weeks later, and he stood there again while I was there, *six months later*. And nothing of significance has been done. It still bewilders me. But hey, the Saints came marching in!

On the way home, about two hours outside of New Orleans, we stopped for gas. A gentleman and his family kindly went out of their way to say "thank you." They were on their way back home to New Orleans. About four to five hours outside of New Orleans, we stopped for dinner. While we were eating, a woman who had gone through the drive-thru saw our sign on the truck and came into the restaurant to say "thank you" with tears running down her face. I will never forget how the people who were severely impacted by this traumatic situation were always more concerned with our well-being and comfort than their own. I believe that I ate better that week than I have since I was a boy staying with my grandparents. I can honestly say that I believe the people of New Orleans are a "people first" community. I can only continue to pray that someday we will all put others before ourselves even in the middle of a tragedy.

This was definitely a life-changing experience for me. I discovered who I am on a much deeper level. I also see how others look at their lives and the lives of those around them. I am very grateful for being a part of rebuilding one of America's greatest cities and for the experience that reminded me that people, not objects, are important in my life. True, I do not want to lose any special keepsakes or possessions, but it is my relationships, experiences, and memories that make life real.

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A row of FEMA trailers, 2007.

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