

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND REBUILDING HOMES

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The following narrative is about a group of college students from the University of Toledo who spent Spring Break on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The rebuilding work was substantial, but it was the teamwork, reflections, and conversations with those affected by the hurricane that changed the students most. Experiencing first hand what a natural disaster looks and feels like helped the group to bond. The author feels that the families they helped would in turn help their fellow neighbors and community members get back on their feet.

Traveling down to the Gulf Coast, 18 students and two professors were preparing to help rebuild in the midst of devastation. All of us were spending our Spring Break week to volunteer, and although we did not know each other, we were all dedicated to helping somehow. The experiences in the group varied: many students were first-year undergraduates; others were college graduates; I was the graduate student; and there were two faculty members. Although each of us was different, we would soon grow to be bonded by our experience.

I signed up for The University of Toledo's Alternative Spring Break just in time. As a first-year social work graduate student coming from another university, I was unfamiliar with campus activities and did not have many acquaintances outside of my program. Although it was my first year in a social work program, I had been practicing social work all my life. I have volunteered in many countries and have a dedication to serve people. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, it was the instinctual social worker in me that reacted first, and the budding professional second. My first instinct was to drive down, go as a Red Cross volunteer, stay with relatives in Houston and help—to do anything but sit safely in Ohio and watch as the tragedy played out on television. The developing professional social worker in me saw the value of staying in school and completing my M.S.W. because many individuals were affected by the tragedy and would need support for many years to come.

Arriving in southern Mississippi was an unforgettable experience. To see the gradual increase in destruction was profound. Each of our group members was bonded by the shock of what the hurricane had done. I explained my reactions to the first day in my journal:

The devastation is unbelievable. To see the destruction that nature has made creates a feeling of sickness in my stomach. So often throughout this journal I have written of how nature's beauty has moved me. But today I feel a sense of fear and disgust with nature. The lives of so many have been ruined; their houses swept away, children and families missing. I feel honored to be a part of the movement of people who are trying to help and who are making a change. The horror on the sides of the road is astonishing, but I am blessed to be here.

It was extremely difficult for me to imagine what the area had looked like before the hurricane. Many of the other students expressed similar feelings of shock, disbelief, and disgust with the way things were six months after the hurricane had hit. Everyone agreed that the media could never convey how horrifying things were. Everyone also realized at that point that this was where we belonged.

We thought we had one week to make a difference in the lives of others, but in fact we would end up making the difference in ourselves. We worked cleaning up debris from the private properties of families. We cleared an older gentleman's yard and gutted the home of a local firefighter. We prepared a home for new construction by tearing off wood siding and gutted another house, leaving only the framework. The group also spent a day cleaning a beach of debris, which is the county's responsibility, so the volunteer hours are credited toward their Temporary Aid for Needy Families loan. We got a lot of work done, and we made things a little bit easier for the families we helped.

However, I believe that it wasn't the building and cleaning up that made the most impact for the people we were helping; it was the conversations, the sharing of stories, the laughing, and the crying that helped the community members most and changed us forever. In fact, each night we shared time together, discussing what happened that day and how it made us feel. The evening discussions and reflection time gave us opportunities to connect on a deeper level. We developed into a unified group, experienced not as 20 individuals, but as a whole.

One struggle that I encountered was dealing with the reality that some of the people we were helping were financially successful before the Hurricane. It was difficult for me

to deal with the fact that there were thousands of others that had much less before the hurricane and lost even what little they did have, leaving them with nothing at all. Yet, those were not the people we were helping. Looking back on the situation I was struggling with, I realize now that those we were helping are likely to be those who would help when others are in need. The people of Bay St. Louis and Waveland, Mississippi, are working class families that also need help and uplifting. I believe that people in need are essentially the same. Need is relative to the situation one is in; experiencing a loss is a tragedy for everyone. It was our call to help the people of Bay St. Louis and Waveland, Mississippi, because they were also in need. Once on their feet I believe that they will help their fellow community members and neighbors in need.

Leaving the devastated area were not 20 strangers but rather 20 friends, bonded by an experience. We were able to help some families to begin to rebuild their homes, but, most importantly, the Alternative Spring Break helped each of us build character, dedication, and friendship.

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Destruction in the 9th Ward.

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