

Making New Orleans Whole Again

"At some point, it became clear that this was not community service we were doing because of something that happened to *them* [to the residents of New Orleans]," remarked Angela Vassos, a faculty member at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School. "It became something that happened to *us*."

Vassos' reflections poignantly framed the impact of the emotional experience 44 students and six teachers had in New Orleans, where from March 20th -23rd, they were part of Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

The students and teachers – representing Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx, Trinity School in Manhattan and Kew Forest School in Queens – along with TCI, teamed up with Tulane University's community service program to help repair and clean the city. Over the four days, as Vassos reflected, the group absorbed and internalized the tragedy's effect on humanity.

TCI's Metro New York Regional Director, Adam Gaynor and Michelle Kay, Communications and Special Projects Assistant, organized the trip, the brainchild of a Kew Forest student group that explores Jewish perspectives on community service. The trip is one in a series of New Orleans-based serving learning projects TCI plans to run over the next few years.

Rebuilding a City

A motivational speech by Tulane University President Scott Cowen jumpstarted the group's four compelling days of rebuilding and learning. "There are no two ways about it – the city will recover," emphasized Cowen, as he described the university's partnership with the city to reconstruct New Orleans.

The team learned more about the flood's impact through a university-sponsored panel of local residents, who shared how the flood had shattered not only the city, but peoples' lives. With this in mind, the group set out each day with new tasks and challenges, forming deeper bonds with each other and the city in crisis.

Though Tulane's Paint Rally, a program that uses volunteers to improve New Orleans public schools, the group spent Tuesday scraping and painting Pierre A. Capdau - UNO Charter School in Gentilly, a New Orleans neighborhood in the Seventh Ward.

On Wednesday, the team worked alongside Americorps volunteers and a community gardener to create a green space for low income residents living close to an industrial area hard hit by the flood. They cleaned toxins from the soil that washed into the city with the flood waters.

On both days, the students, teachers and TCI staff gathered debris in areas of the Seventh Ward.

Guided tours of the entire city brought the group to the Tulane campus, the French Quarter, as well as to the affluent Lakeview community and the working class Lower Ninth Ward – the neighborhoods most affected by the flood. The group also visited Touro Synagogue, where the students met with Jewish high school students who had been affected by Katrina.

Burned into Memory

The group witnessed the unending devastation as they traveled by bus to the work sites. Water lines – indicating the flood waters’ height and measuring from two feet high to above the roof – stretched across metal siding. The flood halved door frames, stripped cars, flattened homes. The destruction left deep impressions and spurred thoughts of action and social justice.

"It has become a new expectation of mine to keep Katrina present in people's minds," said Fieldston 9th grader, Peter as he scraped paint in Pierre Capdau Uno Charter School’s courtyard.

“It's just like the tsunami, the earthquake in India,” Peter added. “No one talks about it anymore so no one cares. We need to be reminding people of this.”

"I'm here to discover some humanity behind the disaster," explained Fieldston sophomore Marlana. “Today, I found a high school diploma in the debris and it [brought the disaster] so much closer,” said Marlana.

Richelle Velker, a New Orleans resident and a student teacher at Capdau, underscored that external assistance is a must for the city’s rebuilding. "Without homes and jobs...we need everybody's help," emphasized Velker.

“When you see people coming in, it's heartwarming and makes us feel like people care and that we are going to see our school become a better place for our students,” added Velker, who returned to New Orleans at the start of the year for Capdau’s reopening.

"There were 40 of us," remarked Valerie, a tenth grader from Trinity. “And it took us a whole day to paint a few rooms. These people have their whole lives to rebuild," she mused.

Continuing to Serve

The students returned to New York City with paint-stained tee shirts, hopeful determination and a communal tie to each other. To promote awareness of the New Orleans’ crisis among New York City dependent schools, Fieldston students are creating a documentary derived from 13 hours of video footage and dozens of interviews with residents.

The students are firmly committed to bringing New Orleans back to life, their sentiments mirroring in part a slogan they saw pasted on highway billboards: “Build faster. Build stronger.” Something the students want the city to do...with their help.

To learn more about the students’ experiences, please see the website created for the group by Fieldston, at <http://site.ecfs.org/katrinaProject/>