

Student volunteers and the Katrina recovery: Some reflections after visiting New Orleans

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During a visit to New Orleans this summer, I drove through many of the neighborhoods whose names have become well known because of their devastation from Hurricane Katrina two years ago: Gentilly, Uptown, the Lower Ninth Ward, Lakeview, St. Bernard.

As I drove through Uptown, with overgrown lawns, closed-up shops, a sort of disheveled look, I thought that it was typical of a poor area in any city. Katie Mears, the building coordinator for the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana's Office of Disaster Response, pointed out the waterline remaining on the fronts of houses in Uptown. These had been well-kept homes, she told me. The closed-up shops and run-down look were the result of Katrina.

Many families had lived in the same neighborhoods for generations. Many neighborhoods housed a mixture of both black and white families. Moms lived next door to a grown child and grandchildren, with another grown child in the house behind them.

The destruction is vast, from very poor neighborhoods to middle class areas. Small shops are closed up or have signs reading "Now Open"; large stores in a mall are simply gone. The Six Flags amusement park is broken and empty like a ghost town.

In more-affluent areas, more rebuilding has taken place. In some working class areas, FEMA trailers sit outside homes being rebuilt. In some neighborhoods, the houses sit empty as if no one wants to be the first to start to rebuild. The Lower Ninth Ward is a wasteland, with houses gone and furniture scattered after the water receded.

You can walk through many poor American cities with run-down buildings. You'll still see people shopping at small groceries and liquor stores, or going into beauty shops or churches. Men sit around in the barbershops or teens shoot hoops in a park. The cities have a certain depressing vibrancy. In New Orleans, what struck me was the vast scale of the devastation and the silence. There's a great emptiness, since so many residents have not been able to rebuild and return to their homes. In New Orleans, many residential streets are silent, and I felt as though I was in a city that had died.

Residents seeking to repair and rebuild have faced obstacles from government indifference and delay, confusing applications for funds, red tape and regulations. They found their homeowner insurance claims denied, large deductibles, or policies cancelled. But in sharp contrast to the government response, hundreds of thousands of volunteers from throughout the United States have poured into New Orleans to help rebuild. I went to New Orleans to visit my daughter, who was one of them.

Abandoned by government agencies and insurance companies, residents have found assistance from volunteer organizations. Floodwaters left everything ruined, and mold thrived in the hot, muggy weather of New Orleans. Before any rebuilding could start, homes had to be gutted. Walls, appliances, sinks, toilets, everything had to be removed. Much of this was done by volunteers, the majority of them young people of college age, who worked with local organizations and churches that put them to work

to gut houses.

Accompanying volunteers who were now rebuilding several homes, I met the homeowners living in tiny FEMA trailers in their front yards. One woman whose house was being rebuilt was legally blind and living alone in the FEMA trailer with a small dog she had rescued. Her daughter's home was also being rebuilt next door. The homeowner expressed praise and high regard for the volunteers.

Many volunteers were college students, but there were also adults who came down for several days or a few weeks. I met a group of students from Bike and Build who had started out in Florida and were stopping at cities and towns along the southern part of the United States on the way to California. They were one of four teams of bikers crossing the United States during the summer to promote affordable housing.

Volunteers working with the Episcopal Diocese (few of them actually adherents of the church) met every morning at 7 a.m. at a warehouse to get their assignments and tools and meet up with volunteers trained as crew chiefs. On the wall was a map with pushpins showing the cities—all over the country—from where volunteers had come.

There were two older couples from the northeastern part of the United States who were putting in door molding, laying laminate flooring and cleaning up ceramic tiles. One couple had come with their son before and then decided to take their summer vacation in New Orleans rebuilding. There were college students who were spending the summer in New Orleans. They worked until about 3 p.m. each day doing hard physical labor in the heat.

My daughter had come down during spring and winter breaks from college. She was spending her summer working with the Episcopal Diocese, which had a well-organized volunteer effort. She explained, "The Episcopal Diocese doesn't work on a first-come, first-served basis. The diocese finds people and ranks them on physical health and mental health. They work on a more-urgent, less-urgent basis.

"During the gutting effort, we were in hard-core outreach mode, where every single person that you talk to gets a business card. Every single person you talk to, you ask them if they have phone numbers of people who need their houses gutted.

"On the one hand, maybe someone can't afford to gut their house and has moved to Atlanta and they're fine. On the other hand, you get a 90-year-old blind woman, and my god, it's horrible, because her husband died in the storm and she's been relocated to a nursing home in Texas. Her daughter is in New Orleans trying to gut their house on weekends, but she works full-time in the city. You get the most extreme stories.

"All ages of people have come. Many are college students, parents, church groups. There are some dangers gutting, for example, termite damage. You can fall through floors in a lot of houses. Ceilings fall down on people. Nails are everywhere, jagged pieces of wood too, and tons of glass. Big appliances can fall on people. There's a lot of mold.

"A lot of people don't have insurance. We had one woman who, unfortunately, before she found out about us, paid to get the contents of

her house removed, and that was her whole savings.

“People have a lot of anger that’s general and directed outward at everything. People came back to spray paint their new address and F—FEMA on the front of their house. No one wants to think about another big storm. Because every error was human-caused, people hope they fix everything.”

Katie Mears spoke about the volunteer efforts: “In 2006, we started getting about 100 volunteers a week. There were lists of people who wanted to help. A college group would come down, have a great experience and tell others. We got college reunion trips, corporate staff development team building trips, conventions that took place and people attending would work a day or two, and regular parish groups. We’ve had 10,000 volunteers so far, about 8,000 gutting houses and the rest, since May, rebuilding.

“At the beginning, there would be meetings of various groups organizing volunteers with a FEMA person. We had too many clients and not enough money. But FEMA didn’t offer the groups any resources to share. They just gave us information that we could read in the newspaper.

“Many people evacuated before or after the storm and had not seen their house or had just driven by. They had lost their job, insurance, community and everything they owned. A health crisis often moved to the top of the list. They had to find a new job, a new school, and dealing with their old house was too much.

“When we began our work, no programs existed. There was not really anything. A lot of times, one family member would come back and give us the names of all elderly family members—maybe 15—that needed houses gutted. The burden on the younger generation was out of control.

“New Orleans is a small town. So when we’d help someone, they would see we were more caring, we’d look for family photos, for their war memorabilia, and they would refer their friends to us. There’s a dignity to have the house clean, instead of a moldy pile of rubbish, even if you don’t know what’s going to happen next. We gutted over 850 homes.

“For people who have no resources, they have no choice about rebuilding. In other cases, as there are more and more brave souls, people get courage from activity, as they see others rebuilding. A lot of times the people are super-shy, difficult people. A lot of people are paralyzed with depression. So much of the depression is situational. It’s not going to get better with therapy. It’s going to get better with having a home for a start.

“Our volunteers come a lot. For some, it’s their third or fourth trip. It’s a big part of their life now. When they go home, they’re advocates for New Orleans in their home. The city is advertising—we’re up and running—so they can get tourism. And for downtown, that’s true. But that doesn’t match what volunteers have to say. Because there’s another thing that’s true, which is what the volunteers see. Everybody who comes will be surprised at how bad it is.”

The sincerity, dedication and energy of the volunteers speak for the feelings of a generation of young people who instinctively reject the self-centeredness, greed and personal accumulation that is promoted by much of American culture. In contrast, the response of the federal, state and local government has been a failure marked by indifference and cynicism.

The federal government allocated funds for rebuilding through various programs. Road Home, a federally financed \$7.5 billion homeowners’ aid program, provides rebuilding grants to homeowners without enough storm insurance. Only one fifth of applicants have gotten assistance. The cutoff for applications was July 31. More than 184,000 people applied for grants, with Road Home sending checks to 44,000 hurricane victims. The state claims a deficit of up to \$5 billion for the program, so many applicants may not receive the grants. In addition, many find the application and the wait frustrating and confusing.

Road Home is run by the Louisiana Recovery Authority set up by Governor Kathleen Blanco to administer the funds. Blanco hired ICF International, a government contractor, to manage the program. ICF had

been doing work as a consultant in government housing programs, first being hired to work out how the funds should be spent in Louisiana after the hurricane. They were then awarded the contract to actually run the program. For ICF, it’s been extremely lucrative. In the last year, its stock price rose 70 percent. In October, a second contract allowed them to expand to 11 cities. Profits reached \$9.2 million. The bonus for John Wasson, ICF’s chief operations officer, was \$1 million in 2006; Sudhakar Kesavan, the chief executive, took in \$1.7 million.

Adding to the roadblocks put in the way of hurricane victims’ rebuilding are FEMA regulations. The Louisiana Recovery Authority is requiring homeowners to build in accordance with federal flood elevation requirements released in March 2006. If a home suffered 50 percent or more damage, which FEMA classifies as “substantial,” it must be elevated on piers and the homeowner will receive a \$30,000 elevation grant. However the cost to elevate can be between \$45,000 and \$70,000.

Inspections have been carried out primarily by private contractors working for the city. After taking photos of the damage, many hurricane victims have made trips to city offices seeking to convince officials their home received only 49 percent damage. If the damage is less than 50 percent, they can be eligible for the Road Home grant, buy federal flood insurance and regain a place to live. Other residents, especially seniors, don’t know how or find it too taxing to deal with the city bureaucracy and don’t get the funds to rebuild.

Following Katrina, the federal government refused to waive the requirement that local governments match 10 percent of FEMA money for rebuilding. For a state that suffered \$100 billion in private property and infrastructure damage, the 10 percent match added another hurdle to getting federal assistance. This requirement had been waived in New York City after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Finally in May 2007, as part of the Iraq funding bill, Bush waived the 10 percent match for Louisiana.

Before Hurricane Katrina, there were 5,100 federally subsidized public housing units that were occupied. Four thousand families were displaced by the storm. After postponing fixing and rebuilding the units in 2006, the Housing and Urban Development department of the federal government announced plans to demolish 70 percent of all New Orleans public housing. Today, there are only about 1,500 public housing units occupied. Thousands of families who once lived in public housing units are on waiting lists for public housing in cities where they fled because of the storm.

The storm also destroyed 142,000 apartments, most of them occupied by working class families. The federal government will require 40,000 families who owned or rented homes before Katrina and are living in apartments, mobile homes or trailers paid for by FEMA to begin paying money towards rent in March 2008.

Families who paid for homeowners insurance for years were shocked to find out that their policies refused to pay for storm damage. Companies claimed the damage wasn’t covered, delayed payments, collected huge deductibles, paid much less than the actual cost of repairs, refused to continue coverage or spiked rates for coverage. Companies overstated flood damage and underestimated wind damage to lower their liability. This was done to shift a larger portion of the claims to the federal government flood insurance program. In cases where families did not have flood insurance, insurance companies tried to say that all the damage was caused by flooding, not wind, and refused any payment.

There are dozens of lawsuits in Louisiana and Mississippi against the insurance companies. This August, the federal Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in one case in favor of the insurance companies, finding that their policies did not cover flood damage. Policyholders argued that the flooding was not an “act of god,” but that the breaches in the levees occurred because of negligence in the design and maintenance.

If homeowners haven’t had their policies canceled, they have frequently found their rates triples or quadrupled. What was a \$2,000-a-year policy

now can cost \$6,000 or \$8,000. Such price hikes make it much more difficult to insure a home and to buy or sell one. High rates also discourage construction of low-income housing, rental housing and housing for the poor.

Hundreds of thousands of young people have flooded volunteer organizations like the Episcopal Diocese, Bike and Build, Common Ground, Helping Hands, and Habitat for Humanity, coming from all over the United States to help victims of Hurricane Katrina. David Eisner, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, estimated that 1.1 million people volunteered following hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the Gulf Coast. They gave more than 14 million hours of service, making this the largest volunteer response to any disaster in US history.

Despite the volunteers' selflessness and response to human suffering, the vast social problems confronting residents of New Orleans, and millions of other Americans, cannot be ended by their efforts. The scale of the damage inflicted by Katrina requires the systematic mobilization of far greater resources than volunteers, however well intentioned, can provide.

Even more importantly, without the reorganization of society on a rationally planned—i.e., socialist—basis, which puts an end to the anarchy of the profit system, new and even greater disasters are inevitable, arising out of economic crisis, environmental disaster, war and the eruption of social conflicts.

The spirit of self-sacrifice and social concern shown by the volunteers in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is characteristic of the best elements of the new generation. But the youth must find a political outlet and a new perspective, beyond what can be provided by community groups, churches, trade unions and the established political parties.

This requires political education as well as determination. As new movements erupt against the war in Iraq and the devastating social conditions and attacks on democratic rights at home, youth can play an invaluable role in the building of a political party so the working class can put an end to capitalism and build a society where the needs of the vast majority are primary, not corporate profit.



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