

The gratitude of the people we helped and appreciation of those not even affected is humbling when the greatest reward was from being there, doing a small part to help and receiving so much affirmation of doing God's will and opening our eyes to the blessings we take for granted every day.

Listening to the contemporary hymn by Merceme "Whom shall I send? Who will go for me to the ends of the earth? Who will rise up for their King? Here am I, send me. From foreign land or neighbors everyone's the same." And he sent us....

January 8, a bright, sunny Sunday am, three of our twenty-one fly out of Raleigh-Durham, eager, not sure of what we will find, what we will be able to accomplish, but ready to get started after all of our planning, meeting, emails and trying to be prepared for whatever we might encounter. A later flight of ten more of our group join us at our layover in Atlanta. We take our final flight to our destination - New Orleans and pray that we can help in some way the people of this city flooded by Katrina. One of our frequent devotional hymns repeat "Shine Jesus shine... flood the nations with grace and mercy. Let "us" be God's instruments to help flood our destination with grace and mercy replacing some of the damage done by nature's flooding. Eight more of our group will drive to meet us at Saint Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church. We are housed in a large home behind the church - grateful for the RHINO (Rebuilding Hope in New Orleans) program which the church sponsors. Peggy Campbell provides our group with delicious soups and sandwiches. We walk around, amazed at the mild weather and the camellias, pansies, and snapdragons blooming with poinsettias and Christmas decorations interspersed at some homes. A few tarps are evident, and the church sanctuary has had some flooding from the roof and the basement, but the wide devastation which we will see Monday seems far away that evening. We meet with Katie who will live in the Land house for the next three months with volunteers going out on work trips and Chesley who coordinates the many requests for assistance and works behind the scenes with the church, and others to make this recovery effort possible. We meet with nine Oberlin College students from Ohio who will be working with us the next day. We discuss coordination of the four showers, fixing water and packing lunches for our group grown to 30 and warm, hot meals at 6. Most of us retire early for New Orleans time, an hour earlier than ours.

Early and late risers from our group eat breakfast, walk the streets, pack and repack our packs in anticipation of the work to be done. We join together united for devotion prior to work. Betty Ann leads us in scripture, music and reminds why we are here - doing God's will thru this work. Jim from St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian church gives us an intro of our work for the day telling us to focus on the job we are working on - not to dwell on the many other homes we will see which also need work, and we line up our caravan with the Oberlin students following the yellow rental truck filled with our working tools. We went only a few blocks from the church to see the first signs of the flooding. We could see the waterline still evident on many of the buildings. Many stop lights were not repaired; so, we had our first orientation to the many four way stops. We heard that it made people "look at each other..." stop and take turns. We passed by rows of hundreds of flood cars in the "common area" (their word for median) waiting for demolition. Our first job was the cleanup of the yard, roof, and storage building of Elyssa and her husband, a radiologist, a home on Country Club Drive. The inside of the home had already been cleared, taken down to the studs as we learned to do on the next homes. This affluent neighborhood flooded 9 feet high by the levee which we could see at the end of the street was mostly vacant and empty, deserted cars left in front of homes, little evidence of recovery work necessary to reconcile a once thriving residential area. Initially the lady of the house told us to take everything to the street. Elyssa's despair over bureaucratic red tape from the past months and ensuing months to come was evident in her indecision on what to keep. We retrieved items which she decided to salvage. The insurance would not cover the value of their home. Some pictures and a doctor's bag left to dry, mementos of their life in their home of over 20 years were left on the floor of the otherwise vacant house. As we finished our job, some of the Oberlin students went across the street to help a solitary worker doing the yard cleanup of more downed limbs and debris. He had looked longingly at our huge workforce of over 30. Elyssa indicated that it was hard to find workers. They too had lost homes and had nowhere to live. She was quick to tell us that the news media was incorrect in proclaiming Katrina's devastation primarily to hurting the indigent. Jim gathered us together telling us to eat our bagged lunches on the way and take a restroom stop at the police station at the upper ninth district where we would meet a policeman whose mother-in-law's home would be one of the two homes where we would

work. The policeman's mother-in-law's brick home had been boarded up. Water still standing, the couch half blocked the entrance to the home. The other home which we termed the white house was higher off the ground, but had water marks up several feet. This was Alvar Street; it appeared that the water level had been approximately 5 feet. Neither owners had taken belongings from the homes. The furniture crumpled as we tried to remove it. Linens disintegrated in my hands. The groups started tearing out sheet rock and plaster as soon as the belongings were removed. The debris by the roadside was over our head. We were excited to see the FEMA contracted bulldozers and dump trucks coming to take away our day's work. One of our group from First Pres. Jim was taken to one of the local emergency rooms for nausea, vomiting and rt. flank pain. Our nurse Betty Ann suspected kidney colic. Our work was done by 430. We rushed to get our agreed upon 5 min. showers, women first Monday. We were amicably rotating with the men. Jim announced his wife Bonnie was serving us red beans and rice with ham and sausage, salad, fresh fruit and king bread. It was delicious. We took turns helping to clean up after meals. Nat returned with Jim; kidney stone confirmed. Bed for this one was at 830.

Tuesday, another beautiful working day started off by Laurie with devotion and music, reminding us of our focus. We spent more time on Upper 9th houses - sheetrock and plaster pulled down. Another group of 10 Oberlin students, added to our group, cleaned the back yard of the white house. Kitchen cabinets taken out. The china & glassware contents we had been reluctant to break were placed in the wheeled trash can or wheel barrow and gently dumped at the curb. Bulldozers cleaned up our head high once again debris in the morning.

Some tore out walls, others picked up debris, swept and others carried out to the street. Walls and ceilings came down along with insulation. Nails pulled out. We worked informally as teams and helped each other with heavy wet loads changing jobs as needed. Another wonderful home cooked meal- salad, spaghetti, strawberries, brownies, and cake for dinner. Good comradery reluctant to end a productive day of work and fellowship.

Wednesday brought another sunny day. Peggy's devotion called on responsive reading of scripture from our group east, west, north and south of First Presbyterian tying us all into a common goal. We worked on Gerald and his stepson Walter's home at the other end of the street from our two homes we had been working on. Gerald had

inquired about our work; desperation evident at the huge undertaking the two were trying to accomplish. They both had jobs waiting for them in New Orleans, but their home was unlivable. Their temporary home and rest of the family was in Houston. It was a lovely Spanish style stucco which had recently been remodeled. Their temporary home for himself, stepson, daughter and wife was in Houston. Gerald had signed the paperwork for a FEMA trailer to be placed in his backyard which needed to be cleared first. Our group with chainsaw and arm power cleared the yard, and we worked with the two as they pulled plaster and lathe boards and hauled debris. Walter, a 28 year old maintenance supervisor at two New Orleans's hotels and his step dad Gerald who works for a company which made huge piping have jobs in New Orleans which they want to come back to soon. Hopefully, they are a little closer to that goal with the work which we did. The bulldozer drivers and associated workers acknowledge us, smile and wave. They no longer seem to think that we will get in their way. We worked on the other homes in the afternoon....so close to being done. We stopped to clean up and have dinner with other church members. Wayne and Carol Anne presented SCAPC with Seagroves pottery platter and chalice and a First Presbyterian Church book of history with our names inscribed inside the cover. The associate minister indicated that the platter and chalice would be used for communion for the young adult services in the chapel where we were holding our devotions.

Thursday was another picture perfect day. From Beth's devotion an excerpt from the speech of King George during World War II, a poem by Minnie Haskins...."And I said to the one who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the Unknown. ' And he replied, 'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way. ' " Jim and Nat were back working with us eager to take care of the business they came to do. We completed the two homes in the upper ninth that day and traveled to our last home which had been cleared of personal belongings. We cleared out sheetrock, insulation, and pulled nails. This was the Spears home, a three bedroom brick ranch. The owner, a principal of an area school was a lady determined to remodel her home and make it better. Her neighborhood was flooded from one of the many canals which flooded with one of the levee breaks, waters rising up to 8.7 feet. She indicated her flood insurance would take care of the renovations. She wrote a check of

appreciation to the Rhino group. The generator, shop vac, ladders, rakes, chain saw, etc. were bought with donations from those wanting to help the church in their efforts. Thursday evening, we ate another of Bonnie's delicious meals. Many of our group listened to music played by one of the Oberlin students. As Nat played, a dance student from the college, and a native of North Carolina danced to "How Great Thou Art". Although I missed this fellowship of our two groups, many of our group were visibly moved by this connection with these young people. I am reminded of the contemporary hymn "I Can Only Imagine" and excerpts "will I dance for you Jesus or in awe of you be still". The comradery and respect for the work we shared was evident.

One of the Oberlin students complimented one of our men with the comment that "he hoped he could work as well as he did when he was his age". Our week was winding down. On Friday, we would divide into different groups to accomplish various tasks: completing the last house, cleaning the Land House, providing some additional supplies such as hanging racks, mirrors, etc. for others who would be staying at the place where we gratefully laid our heads for our work week in New Orleans, visiting Mary's home who was befriended by many from First Pres and visiting and taking choir robes to the minister of First Presbyterian of New Orleans.

Friday saw our first rain which delayed our day's work start and devotions. Betty Ann read from Colossians reminding us to "do all to the glory of God." and led us in recap of sharing things that had special meanings to us that week as follows: "Gerald and Walter's indicating God's blessing to us for the work we did and appreciation when they were ready to give up that we were there to help, being able to work side by side with such grateful homeowners, hymnal page found opened to "His Eye is on the Sparrow", teamwork working with the Oberlin students, opportunity to work with people from the First Pres in different surroundings, the laundry angel, seeing what we each could do, so worth our time being a part of 5 homes being restored, feeling of cooperation, patience at four way stops, appreciation and gratitude of people whom we met on the street, the emergency room staff, and the urologist's staff; comfort to know what our children are going to be doing and where they will be; and most grateful for what has been done for us." We finished the last house that day and went out to eat together with Bonnie, Jim and Katie and Tyrone, one of the church sextons who had lost his home in the hurricane.

On the way to the airport the next day, we talked to the taxi shuttle driver who shared her story. She was on vacation in the Dakotas when Katrina hit. Her biggest concern was trying to contact her daughter afterward - not knowing if she was okay. Her home was 14 miles on the other side of Lake Ponchartraine had little damage. Family members who had lakeside homes - no longer had homes. She currently has 13 people living in her home. The flood surge went 8 miles beyond the lake. The enormity of this disaster was so evident as the week went on. We saw total areas that were like miniature ghost towns. Mrs. Jones, the owner of the white house shared her story in a matter of fact way, her nephew was killed in the hurricane, her son was still missing and the ramp at the back of home which had accommodated her invalid husband was no longer needed. He died within several months of the hurricane. She depends on relatives with whom she lives to provide her transportation, her car destroyed. And those people who wonder why it is taking so long for the rebuilding, would you be able to sift thru what memories are left of your life and of those loved ones who are gone?

She praised us for our help, doing what she did not have the strength to do. The need for help will be there for months, for years.

Sometimes in our lives, we have defining moments which will also stay with us...a memory of a time that shapes our lives. This was such a week. My small portion of helping in New Orleans will always be a large portion of my life. What a blessing to be a part of God's work.....