

'It's still not over'

Katrina cleanup volunteer finds little has changed in New Orleans

Standard-Times photography intern Jessica Raimondi traveled to New Orleans with 22 other UMass Dartmouth students during spring break. In a story and photos in the April 2 Standard-Times, Jessica chronicled the group's volunteer efforts to clean homes that were damaged by Hurricane Katrina. She recently returned to New Orleans with her two sisters to visit the people she now calls her friends.

By JESSICA RAIMONDI
Standard-Times correspondent

NEW ORLEANS — The sticky afternoon heat clung to my skin as I sat on a bench outside our downtown hotel, waiting for the reunion. My stomach quivered and I couldn't stop fidgeting.

I had met Lori Marquez for the first time on March 19, when I traveled to New Orleans with my fellow UMass volunteers to clean out houses that were devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Our first project was the place that Lori once called home — 2174 North Dourgeious Way in the Lower Ninth Ward.

It was where she grew up, her father's house. But as we stood in front of it that morning in March, we were overwhelmed by its destruction.

Every piece of furniture, personal belonging and appliance was either knocked over or broken and every last inch of the interior was coated with a damp mold that smelt far beyond horrible.

While working on this difficult project and another home, our group made friendships that we vowed we'd never break. But when the work was over, we left New Orleans and the devastated families behind.

This return trip, made with my two sisters, would help me to understand the impact our efforts last spring.

LUNCH WITH LORI

When I spotted Lori's white Ford Explorer, I ran across the street, clambered into the front seat, and hugged her before the door even closed behind me. We caught up on the last six months over lunch.

"We're not necessarily worse off," Lori said as we sat at a table inside Port of Call, where they serve the best burgers in New Orleans. "We're blessed. Material-wise we're better off than we were before. A lot of people can't say that. A lot of people are living in trailers and hotels."

Lori is now living on the Western side of the city or 'The West Bank', as locals call it.

"We're amongst the fortunate ones," she explained. "I can't complain. It's sort of an emotional recovery that's still taking place for me, opposed to the physical."

Lori works for Whitney Bank and is able support herself and her son Stevie.

He is in the second grade and is doing well in school. Her father is still in a nursing home, and she said he's doing OK, but he still doesn't have a real concept of what happened to his house. Shyly, I asked her what her plans were to do with the property.

"I have no idea," she said. It has to do with money. If I had the means I would rebuild.



Above, Lori Marquez drives to her gutted and boarded childhood home in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans for the first time since March.

Below, Terrica Moss, befriended by the cleanup crew, peeks through a fence to an empty parking lot while playing ball in the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans.



But for now, it's what it is: it's gutted and boarded. If my dad didn't love it so much I could probably just walk away from it and not look back, but, I just can't abandon it."

Lori hadn't been back to the house since I was there in March because it had been too hard for her. But when I asked her if it was OK to show my sisters the place, her response surprised me. She wanted to go with us.

"I should have done this a while ago," she said. "It'll just have to be part of the healing process."

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

We drove to the Lower Ninth Ward, and to my very unfortunate surprise, the entire neighborhood looked almost exactly as it did six months before.

Roofs were still caved in, debris piles were still waiting to be picked up, and spray-painted figures representing the people who were found both dead and alive, were still visible. But there was an improvement. I saw more people.

A couple of houses were re-built, and there were quite a few trailers. It was clear that the community was trying to stick together with what they had.



Top, Jessica Raimondi, one of a group of UMass Dartmouth students who traveled to New Orleans during spring break to help in the cleanup after Hurricane Katrina, recently returned to the city to find out that little had changed.

Left, Jacob Mitchell untwists a piece of wire to show his visitors the family home.



Photos by JESSICA RAIMONDI
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The man was Jenevieve's brother-in-law Jacob Mitchell, and he explained that Jenevieve was still living in Houston because she has not been able to return yet from her husband being in the hospital. Jacob's house was also ruined in the storm, so he is watching Jenevieve's house while residing on the property.

He didn't mention anything about how the family has been since Mr. Mitchell's death.

He volunteered to show us the home's interior. To unlock the front door, he simply untied a piece of wire that was wrapped around the doorknob.

Walking inside was like a dream. It was exactly how we left it. Even the salvageable items were still in the back room.

The empty interior was incredibly spacious with streams of light that came in from bare windows and large holes in the ceiling.

After the tour was over we all thanked him, but he thanked us even more for coming.

OLD FRIENDS

Before we left the neighborhood I knew there was one more thing I had to look for. Back in March there was a family with little kids that lived just two houses down from Lori who'd always play outside while we worked.

My friends and I would play with them on our breaks and spend time with them at the end of our days. They shared their stories and we listened. We had all grown to really love them.

Before I even made it back to Lori's street, I saw them through a fence of an empty parking lot playing basketball and riding bikes. I walked in. The second they saw me, they ran to me from across the parking lot, and hugged me. It was at that moment my visit felt complete.

Lori took us back to our hotel. It was definitely hard for me to say goodbye, but I knew it wouldn't be the last time I would see her. New Orleans is a part of me now.

"What I'd want the world to know is that it's not over," she said.

"Just because the water has receded, just because it's not headline news any longer, even though some of the tourists are back, it's still not over."

We drove by Lori's house first. I could tell that she didn't really want to get out of the car, but she drove slowly enough for all of us to get a good look. I watched her eyes glaze over as she looked out the window in silence. Moments later we turned onto another street and she resumed talking. We all took a deep breath.

ANOTHER HOME

I realized we were just two blocks away from another very special house at 2534 Franklin Avenue. It was the home of the Mitchell family, the other house my UMass group worked on. The labor at that property was tremendous. It was almost twice the size of Lori's house, but somehow with all of our efforts combined, we finished the job completely — emptying and gutting it in less than two days.

Our drive to complete the seemingly impossible task was fed by news of the post-Katrina suicide of Joseph Mitchell — father of the children who lived there. The family's stress was heightened even more when Joseph's mother, Jenevieve, had to choose between paying for the funeral or paying to have the house professionally gutted.

On my return visit, I spotted two trailers in the yard. I had no idea who they belonged to, but I had to find out. My heart pounded as I knocked on one of the doors. An older man answered. I introduced myself and he shook my hand.