

HELPING HANDS

Not your typical college spring break

Standard-Times photography intern Jessica Raimondi, a UMass Dartmouth senior, traveled to New Orleans for spring break with one of two groups from the university. The UMD spring-breakers joined thousands of students from groups around the country who spent their vacation time cleaning and rebuilding flooded homes for the victims of Hurricane Katrina.



Jessica Raimondi, wearing goggles and a mask to protect her from the moldy mess left by Hurricane Katrina, stands in front of Lori Marquez's home in New Orleans as fellow UMass Dartmouth students Frank Pearson and Gino Escalante clean up debris.



Above, sunlight streams through holes in the Mitchell's house as Frank Pearson rips down the moldy walls.

Below, the Mitchells' belongings sit on the front porch. Among them is the unharmed family portrait and the teddy bear.



Above, Kathleen Gately sorts through items at Lori Marquez's house in the hopes of finding anything salvageable.



The guts of Lori Marquez's house in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans fills the front lawn as Sam Glover of UMass Dartmouth shovels another pile of debris.

The SEED PLANTERS at Light City.

Photos by JESSICA RAIMONDI
Standard-Times special



Back row, from left: George Henry Aulson IV, Tom Northardt, Frank Pearson, Rachael Hernandez, Sam Glover, Lindsey Smith.

Second row: Cliff Taylor, Jessica Raimondi, Brian Praino, Ellen Schumaker, Kathleen Gately, Bethany Enos, Kaitlyn Kandler, Gino Escalante, Fallon Laverdure, Kerrie Clifford, Meredith Reback.

Third row: Thomas Demiranda, Adam Fink, Alexi Bonnette, Stephanie Howard, Johanna Serino. Front: Rachel Donner. Not pictured: Jeneveve Kemembin.

Making a difference in ravaged New Orleans

By JESSICA RAIMONDI
Standard-Times correspondent

We gathered each night, more than 1,200 helpful students, in what used to be a warehouse called Light City in the Lower Ninth Ward of hurricane-ravaged New Orleans.

We slept in a sea of cots, took ice-cold showers and ate lots of mystery meat that made us constipated. At the end of each day, we shared our stories.

I will never forget the overwhelming sense of unity I felt.

I decided to spend my senior-year spring break in New Orleans because I knew I was losing touch with the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

I've known over the past seven months that people were still suffering in Louisiana, but it wasn't until I realized I could help that my mind was drawn back to their situation.

I felt so fortunate when my friend Kathleen Gately, student leader of UMass Dartmouth's Christian Fellowship, presented the opportunity to me. Although there were several Christian Fellowship students participating, she said anyone was welcome.

It didn't take me long to say yes.

I think the response was similar for each of the other 22 students who signed up. We all wanted to help as many people as we could.

DAY 1: Sunday, March 19

We headed to 2174 North Dourgeois Way in the Lower Ninth Ward. At this time, Lori Marquez was No. 3 of 15 on the Campus Crusade for Christ priority list. She grew up at this address and her father lived there up until the Katrina evacuation warning on Aug. 28.

He's had a few strokes over the past several years, so Lori was afraid that if he saw this house in his condition it might kill him.

"Maybe after it gets cleaned up a bit," she said. The house had not even been opened since the hurricane.

Cliff Taylor, a UMass Dartmouth football player from New Bedford, broke down the front door, and we entered. The moment I walked in I could smell the 6-month-old mold. The suffocating stench invaded my nose, but at that moment I knew I had to get used to it very quickly.

We had received a short orientation and training session the night before, but nothing could have prepared us for that smell. I also noticed the 6-foot-high water stains.

Lori reminded us that although the line marked the spot where water had settled for a long time, it actually reached the attic during the worst part of the storm.

Furniture had been thrown around like toys and personal belongings were mangled and caked with mud.

The most disgusting part of the house was the refrigerator. We tried our hardest to duct tape it shut but, by the time we reached the pavement, rancid juice burst from the bottom and sprayed on our feet. We still have a hard time describing to others the horrific stench that followed us for days.

Lori kept a positive attitude and was very kind to us, but it was clear how hard it was for her to watch. There were several times she had to stop what she was doing to let her tears fall. Although we were helping, we were also literally ripping apart her childhood memories.

DAY 2: Monday, March 20

Tom Northardt, a UMass grad student, named our tools after biblical figures. My favorite was Abraham the sledgehammer. He was heavy but, with every smashing swing, we were closer to getting rid of that last piece of moldy plaster.

Lori's house was now completely cleared of belongings and halfway gutted.

We brought all salvageable items to the porch and dumped the debris into an enormous pile on the lawn. We were told the pile had to overflow onto the street in order for the garbage men to pick it up. We heard reports that there are still piles outside of homes today that have been sitting there since January.

We worked until 5 p.m. and felt pretty satisfied but, by the end of the day, Kat Gately shared something with all of us that turned our day upside-down.

She told us about an encounter she had that morning with the Mitchell family, which desperately needed our help. They had lived in the neighborhood for four generations, but had been placed in a temporary house in Houston after the Katrina evacuation. Recently they were forced to leave the temporary house. Because her son felt he could no longer provide for the family, he killed himself last week.

The family had to spend the money they had saved to gut their house to pay for his funeral.

During the conversation, the woman's grandson ran up to Kat, gave her a big hug and said, "I love you. ... My daddy died."

The family followed Kat to Light City. She got permission for them to sign the waiver and be pushed up to No. 1 on the priority list.

Our group would help them next.

DAY 3: Tuesday, March 21

This day was our only break from intense physical labor. We used the morning to see where the levy broke in the Ninth Ward and spent the rest of the day and night serving the Good News Camp, a place local refugees go for meals and clothing.

Our team broke up into three groups. Some spent the day moving pews from one church to another, some helped with odd jobs around the camp and some prepared and served the evening's dinner.

The camp is set up to serve the homeless and the locally underpaid workers. Every day, a team of stationed cooks from the Southern Baptist Convention makes three meals for roughly 2,000 people. The food manager chose me to be in charge of dinner. I didn't speak to him beforehand, but I guess he felt I could do the job.

That night we served chicken, peas, cake and pudding. It was a little stressful at times but with great teamwork we did what we needed to do.

What I noticed most about the people who stood in line was their outright appearance of being worn to the nub.

Earlier in the day we were able to talk to some locals who had been there since Aug. 29. Johnny Micheal James Isidore, who looked about 50, seemed particularly lost. His skin looked like leather and his eyes were swollen; it looked like it was hard for him to keep them open. We sat with him at lunch and noticed that he didn't take a single bite.

"My daughter, her brother and her mother and his girlfriend they were just here this weekend. But, uh I still don't know where my daddy is," he said. "Most people don't understand what happened. They don't know the truth. A lot are returnin' here and they beginnin' to get disgusted. They findin' out what really happened. They tryin' to get rid of the black people."

DAY 4: Wednesday, March 22

We had to use this day to finish Lori's house and get started on the Mitchells' place, so we split into two groups. The new address was 2534 Franklin Ave. — just two blocks away.

When we saw the size of the home, we immediately thought about backing out. The house had eight large rooms, a shed and a garage. We had less than 48 hours and a mess to clean up that had led a man to suicide.

I was in the group that finished Lori's house first. By the time we met up with everyone on Franklin Avenue, the crew had found a cat and four kittens that were still alive. And there had been a gas leak.

The Animal Rescue League came for the cats, and firefighters came for our safety. Everyone had to stay out of the house for an hour and a half. Despite the lost time, somehow the initial crew managed to clean out the first six rooms and thoroughly gut the first two.

Incredibly, among the gray mud that smothered the interior, two items remained virtually untouched.

One was their family portrait. On the moldy, muddy wall, ruined paintings hung next to the picture, but the family stayed unharmed.

The other item was just as clean, if not even more sparkling. In the middle of the family room, a white teddy bear sat waiting to be picked up. Mr. Mitchell had given the bear to his wife for Valentine's Day. A balloon that must have gone along with it was found also intact. On it were the words, "P.S. — I Love You."

Day 5: Thursday, March 23

This was the day of Mr. Mitchell's funeral. It wouldn't have surprised me if every one of us jumped out of bed that morning. All we wanted to do was finish that house.

We saw Lori one last time. She thanked us and said she felt like she had known us all her life.

At the Mitchells, we stood in a circle and prayed for the impossible. The 24 of us split into several groups, hoping to complete different parts of the house at the same time. The back room was the largest. It was a mini apartment with a full kitchen and furniture.

I worked outside because I realized how many family belongings had been thrown around the back yard. I found another small photograph and a clue as to what could have led Mr. Mitchell to suicide. It was a poem from a funeral that was held in February 2005. His sister and her family were killed in a car crash.

During the storm, the back steps had flown 50 feet across the small yard and landed next to the fence.



Left, at Light City, volunteers wait in long lines for a cold shower after a dirty day of work.



Right, the cramped sleeping quarters at Light City.



Left, volunteers search for a portable toilet with toilet paper.



Right, volunteers use one of the five tooth-brushing stations.

I used the steps as a table while I searched for salvageable items around the yard. It wasn't until the end of the day that I realized what the steps had landed on. They had landed on the family's dog.

By 2:30 in the afternoon we finished everything — the eight rooms, the back apartment, the garage and the shed were somehow empty. We met at the front of the house while local construction workers who were touched by the Mitchells' story worked overtime to pick up debris.

Kat put Jeneveve Brown, Mr. Mitchell's mother, on speaker phone for all of us to listen. Even though it was the day of her son's funeral, we could hear the heartfelt gratitude in her voice. She repeatedly thanked us and begged for a way to get in touch with everyone she didn't meet.

It was also her wish to receive a picture of us standing in front of the house so she could frame it and one day hang it on the wall of their new home that will be built on 2534 Franklin Ave.

Back home: March 28

Even though I've returned to my daily routine, my memories of spring break linger. I feel extremely thankful for the experience and the people who helped make it possible — Ellen Schumaker who organized the trip and student leader Kathleen Gately.

My friend Johanna Serino, UMass textiles major, told me she can't even seem to get motivated about her school work unless she relates it to the city. Many of us plan to return in August.

In the weeks ahead, Campus Crusade for Christ is providing more opportunities for volunteers to help Katrina refugees.

For information, contact Rick Amos, head of Campus Crusade New Orleans Project at rick.amos@uscsm.org or Michelle Prindle, assistant, at michelle.prindle@uscsm.org

Beyond New Orleans, other areas were devastated. Group trips are also planned to Slidell, La., and Pass Christian, Miss.

Others from UMass Dartmouth who performed terrific work in New Orleans the same week we did traveled under the guidance of the Massachusetts Student Public Interest Research Group.

HELP NEEDED

Several funding sources for the trip backed out of their commitments shortly before our group left for New Orleans. As a result, \$500 is still needed to pay for the trip.

In addition, each student paid \$100 for airfare, along with a \$30 registration fee.

The group is looking for contributions to continue relief efforts. To donate, contact: u_kgately@umassd.edu

Participants in the spring break trip will share their stories about New Orleans at a slide show at the Woodland Commons, UMass Dartmouth, on May 6 at 6:30 p.m.

Anyone interested is welcome.