

New Orleans still in need of help

By Grey Pentecost

This article was originally published in *The Courier-Times* Roxboro, NC on Wednesday, December 19, 2007

When I drove into Person County on December 11, home from school for Christmas break, 20 years of memories began surfacing as soon as I passed the welcome sign. Once on Woodsdale Road I was on the final winding path to my parent's house, happy to be amongst the people and things I love.

For many people who call New Orleans home, nothing remotely like this holiday homecoming will happen this year. The neighborhoods where they grew up were destroyed, 26 months ago, by Hurricane Katrina and the floods that followed.

Thousands of homes where families once loved and laughed were totally destroyed, and the lots where houses once stood are so overgrown with weeds and scrub that there's no sign of them.

On other streets, thousands more houses are still standing, but are abandoned and uninhabitable. These still bear the marks of rescue teams who came during and after the high water. They spray-painted Xs on the front of each house and entered key information between its arms: date of visit, acronym for the inspecting agency, and at the bottom the most chilling number: how many dead were discovered inside.

We saw a forest of trailers where students our own age, enrolled at Southern University at New Orleans, attend class in big trailers and live in smaller ones because the campus buildings are contaminated by mold.

I discovered that I was best able to empathize with the people of New Orleans when I tried to imagine how I would feel if this disaster had happened in Roxboro. I am currently a journalism graduate student at the University of Georgia, and last month I went to New Orleans as part of a course on health and medical journalism. One of our assignments was to cover a large medical meeting downtown, where conventioners see a part of the city that appears to be back to normal. If we'd quit there, we would not have witnessed the desperation that still grips many residents only a mile or so away.

My classmates and I were guided through the heartbreaking parts of the city by volunteers from Women of the Storm, a non-profit group that helps members of Congress, opinion leaders and journalists understand the damage sustained by New Orleans. We talked to residents, health experts, and local reporters about the challenges of rebuilding, signs of progress, and the impact Louisiana's recovery has on the entire nation. We toured for two days, and were able to visit new neighborhood health clinics and interview doctors and nurses working to rebuild the city's healthcare system.

At times I was overwhelmed by stories told about discouraged and needy residents, and I could understand why the rates of depression and suicide continue to increase here.

But I also met people determined to give New Orleanians a fighting chance and instill hope back into their lives. One such group of people is Common Ground, a non-profit organization that started small – with neighbors helping neighbors after the storm –

but now has more than 40 full-time organizers and hundreds of volunteers from across the country.

In addition to renovating houses so displaced families can return to their neighborhoods, the group helps connect people who've lost everything with health and legal services. They are exploring "bioremediation" projects – seeking natural remedies for contaminated soil in areas that were underwater.

I was surprised when one of Common Ground's founders told me that members of the group recently went to California to lend a hand to people who lost their homes to wildfires. It really struck me that despite the enormous task facing them in New Orleans, these people still reached out with their hearts and resources to help others in need.

I saw firsthand that there is no shortage of work to be done in New Orleans—now and for a long time to come. I admire those with the heart and determination to confront widespread devastation by renovating one home, setting up a distribution center for clothes and household goods, creating a health clinic. Hope is fighting despair in the form of these courageous people. There are many charitable organizations in the city that are in need of volunteers and donations. Anyone can be a part of this city's rebuilding and restoration.

Cutline: Grey Pentecost (left) and classmate Tabitha Lovell survey the remains of a house destroyed by flooding in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward. The repaired levy can be seen in the background.



Photo by: Matthew Hinton