

Picking up the Pieces: New Orleans, Louisiana

Roz Koff

In your kitchen at home, if you drop a glass by accident, shattering the flute across the room, how long would you leave the fragmented pieces on the cold, tile floor, before picking them up? One minute? A few hours, a few days even? Try two and a half years, and counting.

In thinking about going with Hillel to New Orleans, Louisiana (NOLA) for Spring Break, I knew we'd be doing community service. I thought we might get to meet some homeowners. I considered that we would be staying at a volunteer camp with other campuses, and I might meet some new college students like myself. I even hoped that I would get a tan.

Eight students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Hillel headed down south over spring break, unsure of what was to come. The phrase "Katrina relief" is one frequently heard in these past two and a half years, but it is nearly always left undefined. While many of our friends were laying on a beach somewhere close to the equator, we were living in hastily built shelters, sleeping on wood planks with thin mattresses, and eating iceberg lettuce and rice each day.

A post-disaster bus tour; a walk through the French Quarter; a visit to the Tulane campus; an afternoon on the beach -- we truly experienced so many aspects of New Orleans. However, it wasn't until I had spent some time in the city and working on site that we attended a lecture with Times-Picayune managing news editor Peter Kovacs. He had lived through the storm and helped me to understand the meaning of the "X"s we had seen on nearly every home in the city.

These X's were a spray-painted mark that meant the house had been checked for survivors – in many cases weeks after Katrina had it. In the top of the X sat the date that a group had come to inspect the house. The left side of the X read the name of the group; often in print was "TFW," or "Task Force Washington" – a group from the Federal government that had inspected many of the neighborhoods we spent time in. Next, on the right side of the X hazards found within the home were listed to explain as to why others should or should not re-enter. Finally, below the X was a number, hopefully "0," indicating the number of bodies found in the house.

From here on out, when driving the daily hour-long commute from our campsite in Kiln, Mississippi, to the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, Louisiana, rather than commenting on the cute shops starting to re-open, or the neon colors on newly painted houses, we would sit in silence, reading the X's as we drove by, praying to see a zero. And most of the time we did. But each time we would see a one, or a three, or a fourteen, and often with a notation below it "+ 3 dogs," we would regain our silence and continue on our journey to work.

As an American, a situation that shocked me occurred when our group leader inadvertently got off at the wrong exit from the interstate. Forced to take back roads, we were shocked at what we saw: literally hundreds of American citizens living in tents underneath the interstate bridge. We later learned that many of these people are working poor or mentally ill who have little or no access to medication or governmental services and are thus unemployable. Bus stops have been re-routed to pick up children from these “homes” underneath the interstate, so that children can go to school.

One of our last nights in Kiln, affectionately referred to by its residents as “the Kill,” a group of Madison students decided to walk along the highway to a nearby Dollar General store. Feeling accomplished from our work the past week, we laughed about various ways to stay in touch once we returned to school. Suddenly, a run-down black Suburban pulled up to us in the parking lot, and a woman in her early-50s poked her head out of the front window. She asked where we were from, and almost before we could answer, three blond haired girls in the back seat of her truck interrupted, squealing at the excitement of meeting us. With tears in her eyes, the woman began, “I don’t know if ya’ll have heard this or not, but ya’ll don’t know how much ya’ll mean to us down here. We really, really appreciate everthin’ ya’ll are doin’ for us down here. I personally know that I lost my home, my business, and thirteen family members in the hurricane, and I cannot thank ya’ll enough for comin’ down here to help us out.” Shocked, we were speechless for a moment as we stood there, in awe, nodding to what she had just told us. We had never met this woman, had not even come down here to help her or her specific community, but here she was with such an overwhelming love for us. One of the girls in the back seat poked her head out and screamed, “MY NAME IS MADISON!” as we all laughed how we go to ‘Madison.’

On our last night, our group spoke about “where we wished to go from here,” in continuing to spread the word about what we had done and seen. Previous to the trip, our peers had all heard of what we were doing, and simply said, “Oh, that is so good of you,” or “Wow, you are such a good person!” We hope that by telling our stories, and showing our pictures, others will become motivated to help.

I did not know the extent of the damage that still remained in New Orleans, Louisiana. I did not realize that so many cities and states in the surrounding area were deeply affected by the storm. I had no clue how much volunteers continue to be appreciated by all down there. I did not know that so many people had left and might never come back.

Two and a half years later, the glass is shattered all across the kitchen floor, and nearly everyone in this country has forgotten that it ever broke in the first place. We can put a rug over it, to hide it, but we will still get cut if we step on it. We could sweep it into a corner, but then it is cosmetically unappealing to the entire room, and is still potentially dangerous. We could pick up half the pieces, reducing the danger of the sharp glass, but

the problem still remains unsolved. Having been put off so long, the glass has been further broken, and is now even more difficult to remove. The job is getting too big for one person; we have to call in for help. When is someone going to take the initiative and finally clean up these damned pieces of glass?! When is help ever going to come?

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