

## **PROJECT GREEN LIGHT NEW ORLEANS**

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The realization that the devastation and destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina may have provided an opportunity for the New Orleans community to rebuild better and more efficiently than what was in place prior to the storm was made evident by my experience volunteering for Project Green Light New Orleans. Through my volunteer work I learned a great deal about energy conservation and ways to lower carbon emissions through use of “compact fluorescent light bulbs” (CFLs). However, some of the most unforgettable lessons I have learned has to be how much in need the residents of Louisiana still are, how much they have been forgotten by the rest of the country, and how much volunteers and donations are still desperately needed and appreciated.

The Loyola Community Action Program (LUCAP) is working in with Project Green Light to replace common incandescent bulbs with the new energy efficient and environmentally safe CFL bulbs. These new CFL bulbs are considerably more expensive than customary incandescent light bulbs, but they have a lifespan of five to seven years in addition to using less energy to emit the same amount of light. So these new CFL light bulbs will reduce the amount of carbon emissions and reduce the amount of money residents spend on their electric bills.

Working with the residents of Louisiana for Project Green Light, being able to help them save much needed money, and being blessed with the opportunity to educate them about the effects of global warming on the environment, was truly a rewarding experience. Communicating and explaining what we were doing and how it would help them save money and save the environment was amazing. Every single resident was extremely inquisitive and appreciative when I took the time out to explain and go over terms with them and illustrate exactly what it was these light bulbs were designed to accomplish. It was quite evident that a few of the residents could not believe that we were replacing every single light bulb in their home with these new and semi-expensive CFL bulbs for free. Seeing the surprised and extremely grateful gestures and expressions on the homeowners’ faces was truly rewarding and inspiring, because even this small detail helped make a difference in their lives.

The people I have encountered and the experiences I have had, while volunteering, will most definitely stay with me for a long time. Despite the fact that this volunteer service was an assignment, I hope to continue working with Project Green Light in the future. For I feel that aiding people who are still struggling almost three years after the storm to cut back on costs and simultaneously be more environmentally

efficient is a cause for I want to work. Global warming, as we all know, is a result of the depletion of the ozone caused by too much carbon in the atmosphere, to which humans have contributed through our daily activities. So in essence a city that has been devastated by a horrid tropical storm (which was most likely so severe because of global warming) is seeking means to eliminate/lessen the cause of the disaster. Using these light bulbs will lessen the carbon emissions a large city like New Orleans produces, and possibly help reduce the creation of abnormal weather patterns like Katrina by encouraging other cities to use CFL bulbs as well.

## **HISTORY OF PROJECT GREEN LIGHT**

A Swiss musician and web designer named Andi Hoffman started Project Green Light in 2006, as a response to the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. While getting ready to embark on a tour in Europe with his band “B-Goes,” Andi began thinking about how much pollution he and his band mates would be creating, with regards to the flight and driving around in their van. So he decided to counteract all the pollution they would be creating by creating an energy efficiency project.

While on tour Andi announced that he would be taking up a collection to aid an energy-conserving project to help efficiently rebuild New Orleans. Andi managed to raise \$2,000, which served as his startup capital to buy the initial florescent light bulbs. With the help of the non-profit organization, Alliance for Affordable Energy, Andi was able to create Project Green Light. The Alliance for Affordable Energy assisted Andi and Project Green Light by providing volunteers for his initial outing, and continues to aid Andi by matching volunteer numbers and CFL bulb donations (Gist 2007).

These CFL bulbs “require only a fraction of the energy yet provide the same amount of illumination” (Gist 2007). Thus, in comparison to the amount of energy consumed by incandescent light bulbs and the amount of heat given off them, the new CFL bulbs will save the residents money on their electric bills. The lack of consumption and production of heat from these CFL bulbs creates less of a need to use air conditioning, because the house will not be as hot, which also contributes to reduction in carbon emissions and energy costs.

Although there are CFL bulbs available for dimmers and three-way light fixtures, Project Green Light does not provide them for financial reasons. In order to supply the light bulbs, replenish their supplies and reach those in need, Project Green Light relies on donations from wealthy participants and corporations.

Affiliates of Project Green Light do not recommend utilizing CFL bulbs in “totally enclosed recessed fixtures” as the enclosure may “create temperatures that are too high to allow the use of a compact fluorescent bulb” (Green Light New Orleans 2008). Installation of CFL bulbs in recessed lighting fixtures will cause the bulb to burn out within a couple of months of initial installation rather than a couple of years as it supposed to.

Another important fact about the CFL bulbs is that they contain a small amount of mercury. So when/if one were to break a bulb the steps to follow for proper disposal include opening all windows to allow air to circulate, vacate the area for about fifteen minutes, cleaning the pieces with a damp rag and sealing the cleaning materials as well as the pieces of bulb in a plastic bag. These pieces should not be vacuumed or incinerated

because this would disperse the mercury into the atmosphere. Project Green Light is working along side Wal-Mart to help in a recycling system for the bulbs.

In his effort to aid the residents of New Orleans to rebuild in an energy and environmentally efficient manner, Andi has installed 3,724 CFL light bulbs, conserved energy in the form of 1,467,256 kilowatt hours, which in turn translates into \$171,304, and thus a reduction of “carbon emissions by 800,660 pounds” (Gist 2007). With the birth of Project Green Light, Andi and his friends sought to “assist low and middle income families of New Orleans [to] switch from incandescent to the new CFL bulbs by going into one house at a time, and install[ing] these bulbs for free through the assistance of volunteers” (Project Green Light New Orleans 2008).

### **SERVICE WORK AND THE PEOPLE**

Awaking at an early 9:00 a.m. on a Saturday started out with groans and moans until a cup of coffee was ingested. I went downstairs and met with various other students, some of whom were from my class and others who were not. As per usual with LUCAP, volunteers arrived on time, whereas the personnel were about a half hour late. After filling out the liability sheets we proceeded to wait around for another fifteen minutes. Then, also customary, means of transportation was an issue between LUCAP and University police. After an hour and a half of waiting we were ready to go.

Before embarking on our trip to replace light bulbs, we had to stop at Project Green Light’s headquarters, which unbeknownst to our supervisors was moved to another location. Luckily, an affiliate from Project Green Light assumed we were unaware that the location had been changed, and surprised us at the old headquarters. Here we proceeded to fill out more tedious liability sheets. Then we were given a rundown of the organization, what it is purporting to do, the paper work to be filled out by the volunteers and the clients respectively, and an introduction for us to utilize upon approaching homeowners. We were taught how to refer to a chart to inform the clients of how many kilowatt hours (energy) they would be saving, carbon emissions they would be reducing (by pounds), and in turn the monetary value of their installation over the lifetime of the bulbs.

Afterwards we were given boxes of CFL bulbs to load into our van and take with us. There were specific numbers and wattage necessary for the houses in which we were to install the bulbs. We had specific numbers for each home because residents must send in a request form or go online and fill out a request for the specific wattage and number of light bulbs necessary for their homes. While volunteering we also have sheets that neighbors or other relatives may fill out to provide us with the same information on the spot, so we can bring them back with us and set up an appointment with them at a later time. Surprisingly enough, I was able to retain everything that was said, and thus I was designated the task of speaking to the clients and educating them about the information, including a brief description of Project Green light, the CFL bulbs themselves, and entrusted with the task of documenting the installation.

Yet upon entering the first home in Gentilly with my two teammates I realized that sacrificing my Saturday of sleep and enduring the disorganization of LUCAP was well worth it. Our first clients were an older couple by the name of Donald and Gail Bergeron. Although they were slightly more affluent than most people Project Green

Light seeks to assist, they were charming and a pleasure to talk with. Mr. Bergeron helped us install his light bulbs and told us that he is retired and has lived in the house with his wife for almost two years. Outside the residence was rather modest, yet the interior was exquisite. We learned that the Bergerons have remodeled sections of the eighty-year-old residence and that originally it had thick wood paneling, even the ceiling, throughout the entire house.

After small talk about the house and novelty items left by previous residents from many years back, before we were ready to leave we started discussing Hurricane Katrina. This is when we learned that Mrs. Bergeron's father, 86 years of age, is still living in a F.E.M.A trailer after being repeatedly swindled of his money. Her father, in an effort to rebuild, lost around \$140,000 by paying workers in full prior to reconstruction of his home. Numerous and different people would claim to be construction workers, demand payment in full prior to performing work, yet they were never seen again after receiving their initial payment. In sharing our own personal experiences regarding Katrina, we all created an understanding that transcended any class or ethnic lines, and bound us together.

I walked away feeling accomplished and satisfied with myself from being able to talk to an older couple who seemed to be quite lonely. As selfish as this may sound, I loved volunteering for them, because they in return made me feel good about myself. However, the rest of my volunteer work was not as cheerful, but it was increasingly rewarding.

When one is under the impression that people throughout a state that was ravaged by a horrible storm are working their way back to normalcy and have almost accomplished that goal, a harsh realization occurs when one realizes that in reality they are far from it. Through my volunteer work I was able to see the vast differences between the stages of recovery between people within the same community. In one area there are affluent, happy and healthy people living in a structurally sound home; whereas, simultaneously people living just a few blocks away are overcrowded, living in a dilapidated building with poor sanitation, surrounded by vast overgrowth.

The small number of children remaining within an impoverished area, just a few blocks away from the initial house, seemed so lonely. They no longer have playmates, except for those children lucky enough to have relatives around the same age living with or near them. The reason I say this is that while working with Project Green Light I had the pleasure of meeting a little two-year-old girl by the name of Nakesha, as well as her father and uncle, while replacing their light bulbs. She was extremely adorable and stuck to my teammates and me like glue, constantly coming in to show us her toys while we were replacing bulbs throughout the house. Then her uncle took her outside to play while we finished up. This is when I gained the opportunity to speak to her father.

Her father remained in bed the entire time, and while talking to him he repeatedly apologized for not getting up, because he had an ailment pertaining to the blood vessels in his leg and was in chronic pain. Reassuring him that this was a volunteer effort and that we are there to do it for him, he began to tell me how he is finally going to get surgery on Monday and hopefully be able to get up and walk around again without pain. This conversation took place right before we left, so I wished him the best with his surgery and hoped for a speedy recovery, after constantly telling him that he had a beautiful and bright-spirited little girl.

I felt guilty about leaving Nakesha and her family. Although I helped install the light bulbs for this family, I felt that they needed more than “just this.” The reason I say this is because their house was shotgun-style, upon entering the door there was the living room, followed by the father’s bed (not really a room as seeing there was no door, or walls enclosing the area), then the kitchen and into Nakesha’s room, which had three twin beds in it. The house was evidently in an impoverished area, for it appeared that families of the same economic standing surrounded Nakesha’s family.

It still bothers me as I write this, because there were flies, garbage and old food sitting in the kitchen. To think that a young child, whose father is obviously incapacitated must live under these conditions irked me. In addition, I kept wondering where her mother was. There were photos around the house of Nakesha with an older woman. I assumed it was her mother, and yet I wonder if something may have happened to her during Katrina and Nakesha was left with her father. I don’t know if I will ever find out the answer to this question, but I am happy that her father will be getting his much needed surgery and has the help of his brother to take care of his daughter.

### **REFLECTION ON SERVICE: A RESPONSE TO DISASTER**

In light of what we have learned in class, although this is not a religious response per se, volunteering does not have to be. Donating one’s time to aid those in need is a humane compassionate response to the suffering of fellow humans, humans in desperate need. Those who have endured the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, I truly believe may be able to experience stress-related growth by providing understanding for others and being able to help others emotionally throughout this difficult time.

Yet the accounts of the individuals portrayed in *Voices from The Storm*, who have suffered and received no help or sympathy, have been manifested into reality for me. The conditions that people to this day are forced to endure are unthinkable. Many have not and will never see any form of assistance from the government in which they so desperately believed in and needed (Eggers and Vollen 2006).

In my opinion, Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster with a naturalistic explanation, purely a result of the laws of nature. However, the lack of efficient levees, funding, means of transportation for the poor and brutish treatment of the evacuees is a form of an attributive explanation. The reason I feel this way is because it is my belief that God blesses humans with the gift of life and knowledge. With these gifts comes the gift of “free will,” which enables us to do and not to do because we choose to do to or not. So this ability to choose is what corrupts humans in effect, for at times we do not choose to do what is *right*. Therefore, humans are at fault for abusing the gifts God has given to them, and using them against one another in an intentional and malicious manner. God is not to blame. Humans are to blame for abusing the gifts we have been given. Katrina was a natural disaster that had a rippling effect due to the corruption of the human consciousness.

### **CONCLUSION**

Simultaneously, volunteering for Project Green Light was a very depressing, eye opening and rewarding experience. As mentioned above, coming to the harsh realization

that people are still in dismal, dilapidated and uninhabitable dwellings is quite upsetting. “Out of sight, out of mind” seems to be an adage that is meaningful to this day with regard to the people of New Orleans. It is my opinion that a documentary, or news media coverage, should be made and broadcast nationally to inform people that residents of Louisiana are still in need of assistance.

The ability to help people in need as a result of the destruction left in the wake of Katrina is self-fulfilling. Although, installing energy-conserving and environmentally friendly light bulbs is something very minute on the grand scale of what is still left to achieve, it is reassuring to know that I have made a contribution to the people, no matter how small. On a positive note, through the help of Project Green Light, the devastation wrought by Katrina may have provided an outlet for the New Orleans community to rebuild better and more efficiently than what was in place prior to the storm.

Hopefully with this frame of mind, and Project Green Light prospering, New Orleans will receive more media attention and start a ripple effect throughout the nation and create environmental awareness. If New Orleans, and other areas devastated by Katrina start rebuilding with a conscious and deliberate effort to use environmentally safe materials, then there should be no excuse for other areas throughout the country to follow suit.

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