

Volunteering with the Saint Bernard Project (Shrockin')

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Hurricane Katrina left residents of New Orleans desperate in many ways; they were deprived of their homes, separated from family members, and forced to work their way through seemingly endless paperwork to apply for aid. Though the initial problem of physical destruction may have taken precedence over emotional grievances, I think that the people of New Orleans' psychological needs were overlooked and never fully remedied. People felt abandoned by God and abandoned by the government. They felt as though the people they were supposed to turn to for help in the most dire of circumstances had turned their backs. Victims needed physical aid but they also longed for emotional support. Since the storm, a lot of attention has been focused on how to rebuild the city and fix the physical damage left in Katrina's path. Only recently has the emotional distress of victims (and the psychological ramifications of the storm) even been acknowledged. Health care and social care workers now openly acknowledge the increase in physical and emotional problems prevalent among survivors of Katrina. Post-traumatic stress disorder is common among survivors of Katrina and physical ailments are now being associated with the unbelievable stress and sleep deprivation experienced by victims in the aftermath of the storm.

Volunteer organizations are an integral piece of the rebuilding process after a disaster. They provide victims with financial aid, advice, and guidance; most importantly they provide survivors with a needed sense of security and stability. Most often, these programs define their capacity to help people with numbers. The Saint Bernard Project, the volunteer organization with which I worked for this assignment, likewise defines its success in numerical terms. In the Project's pamphlet, the organization is praised for having aided over 125 families, for being able to rebuild a home in only seven to ten weeks, and for using only \$10,000 in the rebuilding of each house (St. Bernard Project N.d.). Though these figures do highlight several of the organization's successes, I think that the true magnitude of its presence cannot be effectively described with statistics. The actual aid (both financial and labor-oriented) provided by volunteers is only a small part of what these organizations help accomplish after a disaster. They help promote positive religious coping; volunteers avail themselves to victims and offer themselves as friends to those in distress. They allow victims to grieve and help them in

justifying and overcoming the traumatic event. Volunteer organizations encourage stress-related growth by encouraging victims to move past the devastation and begin to reconstruct their lives. I believe that an organization's ability to foster positive religious coping and stress-related growth among disaster victims are the most beneficial services rendered by such programs. Though the material aid provided by volunteers is undoubtedly necessary in the rebuilding process, volunteer organizations offer themselves as more than just relief funds. They help victims to move past a disaster and guide them through the aftermath, allowing survivors to grow from the traumatic experience.

Loyola University Community Action Program (LUCAP) is a student governed organization dedicated to providing volunteers for service programs throughout the New Orleans area (Loyola University Community Action Program [2008.]) LUCAP works with volunteer organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and Ozanam Inn, as well as hunger relief centers across the country. Every few Saturdays, LUCAP volunteers work with the "Shrockin'" project, helping to hang sheet rock and perform other tasks needed for rebuilding homes affected by Katrina. LUCAP volunteers are directed to the St. Bernard Project office where they are assigned a work site; local residents apply to the Project for help in rebuilding and the Project fills received requests on a per need basis.

The St. Bernard Project is a fairly new volunteer organization; it is a nonprofit organization that began helping victims of Hurricane Katrina in August 2006. The Project enables local families to rebuild and renovate homes that they may not otherwise be able to afford to maintain. Habitat for Humanity, a similar volunteer organization, only extends help to those whose homes have been completely demolished. Unfortunately for many victims of Hurricane Katrina, the winds and flood waters completely damaged the interiors of their homes but left the foundation intact. Thus, these New Orleans residents were not provided aid from Habitat for Humanity and, prior to the foundation of the St. Bernard Project, many of these residents were unable to rebuild their homes. St. Bernard Project uses volunteers and donations of building materials (paint, nails, insulation) to rebuild completely gutted homes. It takes the Project about \$10,000 and eight to twelve weeks of work to rebuild a house that has been completely gutted.

The mission of the Saint Bernard Project is to remove barriers for residents trying to move back to the New Orleans area. Not only does the Project provide aid to families excluded from other such benefit programs, but the organization also runs Support-A-Family programs which provide volunteer labor and building materials to residents in need. Families receive donations of labor and resources so that they can rebuild their homes. The Project has enabled hundreds of New Orleans residents to return to their city by providing them with needed help. The program is important not only for the benefit it is providing to the New Orleans area (rebuilding hundreds of homes throughout the Chalmette area in St. Bernard Parish), but it is one of the few relief programs that offers a helping hand to anyone who needs it. Many of the volunteer programs established to help dislocated New Orleanians after Katrina require applicants to fill out numerous forms or qualify for specific aid. The St. Bernard Project opens its doors to those who need help and is genuinely committed to the rebuilding of New Orleans.

Though the St. Bernard Project is the organization that actually placed us at a worksite, when I first volunteered with LUCAP, Loyola volunteers worked with volunteers from Americorps (a volunteer group similar to Habitat for Humanity). Americorps is a network of volunteers who receive college scholarships in exchange for their work. Each Americorps member that worked with the St. Bernard Project was assigned a house and acted essentially as

the head contractor for that house. The Project provided Americorps volunteers with a staff to help them finish rebuilding their houses. Because Americorps is a national organization, its mission is far more general than that of the St. Bernard Project. The Project is dedicated exclusively to the rebuilding of New Orleans; Americorps is committed to providing service throughout the country, wherever needed. The girls that we worked with from the program were stationed in New Orleans for three weeks and were then going to move to another site in Texas, followed by another in California. Americorps has been a prominent organization in New Orleans since Katrina and has helped hundreds of civilians move back to their previously damaged homes (Americorps [2008]).

The first time I worked with the St. Bernard Project, our worksite was in Chalmette. The house was located on Legend Avenue near the intersection with East Judge Perez. The students from Loyola were redirected, via the Project, to the Americorps site where we met Emily and Sarah, two Americorps volunteers. The foundation of the house was completely intact: the walls were erect and undamaged, and wooden beams supported the roof and interior. Nothing else remained in the house except for the cement floor and the wooden beams. The house had been stripped of everything including the tile and the insulation, but because the wooden infrastructure had remained intact, the family had faced extreme difficulty attaining help from other agencies. They reached out to the Project, who worked with Americorps volunteers to provide the family with desperately needed help.

Our job was to coat the wooden beams with white primer. Ordinarily, before paint can be applied, a house that has experienced water damage has to be tested for mold. The mold has to be treated and mold-damaged areas have to be removed before the initial stages of rebuilding can begin. Fortunately, the homeowners had previously conducted a mold test and, since very little of the house was damaged by mold, we were to apply primer simply as a safety precaution. If any of the treated mold was still living, the primer would contain it and eventually the mold would die. We applied primer to the exposed beams and were able to finish painting about half of the house in our time there. (Sarah and Emily were extremely grateful for our work; they told us it normally takes one person about two weeks to apply primer to all of the beams.)

My second experience with the St. Bernard Project was relatively similar: we again painted the wooden support beams to protect against future mold growth. The second house was further along in the rebuilding process than the first house had been. Almost all of the beams were painted when we arrived; all that was left for us to complete were the walls and hard-to-reach beams (mostly the scary ones lining the ceiling).

Unlike my first experience volunteering with the St. Bernard Project, on the second occasion, we were not met at the site by other volunteers. Although the Project does often partner with national volunteer organizations to rebuild New Orleans homes, they also rebuild homes without the additional aid of these groups. The Project receives donations and volunteer labor and uses these resources to help homeowners who may have been denied by federally funded programs. I am not completely sure, but I get the feeling that when the Project is able to work with volunteers from other organizations (such as Americorps), the rebuilding process goes much more quickly. I could tell that the second house had been worked on previously; much of the mold treatment had already been completed. The first time I volunteered, however, even though the house was in an earlier stage of rebuilding, the Americorps volunteers were each assigned to oversee the full completion of one home. The Project supervises the rebuilding of more than twenty houses simultaneously; volunteers do not rebuild houses individually and completely like Americorps members. The St. Bernard Project is able to dedicate labor and

resources only when they are donated to the organization and the program is so small personnel-wise that it is impossible for one person to oversee the complete restoration of a home. The rebuilding proceeds much quicker when other organizations work with the Project, however this local relief provider has helped many New Orleans residents rebuild despite its small size.

The second time I volunteered with the Project, what really struck me was the location of the house we worked on. I'm not referring to the geographic location, but rather the demographic one. The first home I had worked on was in a section of Chalmette that was entirely dedicated to the rebuilding process. Very few people actually inhabited the homes in this region; the majority of the people working in the homes were volunteers affiliated with national relief programs. Almost all of the houses on the street were in some phase of reconstruction; St. Bernard Project signs were posted on many of the lawns indicating the presence of volunteers. I remember seeing no one on the streets near the home we were rebuilding except the two girls from Americorps with whom we worked. I also remember the sense of absolute silence that enveloped the area; though people were busily driving nearby on East Judge Perez Drive, only one or two people drove down Legend Drive during the entire five hours we were there. The people who lived in these homes clearly either were not going to return to their damaged homes or they had the means to move to a hotel temporarily while their home was rebuilt.

Conversely, the second house that I worked on was in a neighborhood in which some residents had already returned to their homes. This is not to say that the homes had been rebuilt and refurbished after the storm; the homes in this part of St. Bernard Parish (Violet, Louisiana) were in even greater disrepair than the homes on Legend Drive had been. The windows of the houses were almost all shattered; there were shards of glass hidden among the extremely high grasses in the front lawns of almost all of the houses. Bricks were loosely set and falling out of the houses and many of the homes still had major roof damage from the storm. Because of the absence of windows, you could see completely into the homes in this neighborhood. None of them had been reconstructed at all; each house contained only wooden beams, few of which had been painted by homeowners or volunteers. The houses were not suitable for living. Many of them were uninhabited and merely provided a hang out place for local teenagers, however some of them housed families with several children.

The first time I volunteered I felt the sensation of hope. It was clear to me that I and the other volunteers were helping people who could not help themselves, but who were able to wait until the rebuilding process was complete. There was nothing sad about the situation; we, as volunteers, were able to venture into devastation and help provide aid to storm victims, returning home at the end of the day feeling good about the deeds we had done. My second experience with volunteering *was* somewhat sad. Unlike the completely abandoned neighborhood I had encountered on my first visit with the Project, this neighborhood was filled with kids. Young children—none of them could have been older than seven—played by themselves in the streets while their parents did other things. They played in the grasses filled with glass shards from the windows and ran around in the abandoned dilapidated houses. When we asked three young boys if we could use their hose to clean our paint brushes, they eagerly invited us to play a game of catch. These children and their families were not able to leave the devastation and wait until their house was fully rebuilt to move home. Their families were financially unable to leave the destruction that Katrina had caused; they were forced to remain in unsafe houses.

Gina (from our class) expressed this depressing sentiment when she exclaimed, as we were leaving, that it seemed as if the government just did not care about the people of New

Orleans. This was the feeling that permeated my second volunteer experience; the abominable condition of almost all of the homes conveyed the message that these people were on their own. They obviously did not have the financial means to rebuild their homes without financial aid—this was evidenced by the numerous broken windows and rotting roofs. The neighborhood was clouded by desperation: the few families that actually inhabited the homes lived twenty houses away from anyone else. The houses in between them stood abandoned, still completely destroyed from Katrina.

Perhaps one of the worst things about the state of this neighborhood was the fact that two homes built by Habitat for Humanity stood completely rebuilt, yet vacant. In front of both of them were large signs promoting the foundation and boasting the fact that these houses were Habitat's 1,000th and 1,001st rebuilt homes since Katrina. It is undoubtedly a step in the right direction for volunteer organizations such as Habitat to dedicate their funds and volunteers to rebuilding New Orleans homes, but these two homes, in the midst of such desperation, seemed almost mocking. They stood completely empty, ready to be filled with new residents while neighbors across the street are forced to remain in their dilapidated homes. The boys that had been playing in the yard lived in a house with at least three broken windows and very few walls, yet there was a perfectly built vacant Habitat home across the street. The new houses not only accentuated the inability of other residents to rebuild efficiently, but it also perpetuated a feeling of desperation and despair.

Volunteer organizations are faced with an incredibly difficult task. They help people to overcome and move past disasters; the organizations listen to disaster victims and try to ameliorate their situation in any way possible. The work that they do is extremely important and taxing. How do you decide whose house gets rebuilt when two eager applicants apply for the same funding? How do you tell one homeowner that s/he is going to have to wait for aid because the volunteers are out working on someone else's home? There is no way to answer these questions; it is an unfortunate component of disasters that often far more aid is needed than is provided. Even with more funding and volunteers, volunteer organizations would still not be able to reach *every* victim of a disaster. Because of this, it is often too easy to place blame on the deficiencies of these volunteer groups. People question the allocation of funds and view a slow response as merely neglect.

One of the key things I have learned in this class about the way in which people respond to disaster is that it is a slow process. People move through different stages of rationalizing and overcoming the event. Placing blame is often a component of the justification process as victims search for some reason as to why they were affected by the disaster. This blame is often directed at God or towards relief agencies and organizations. If one is not going to blame God for having caused such an event, one likely will instead blame the organization that was supposed to provide relief. Victims are angry, and directing their anger at a certain individual, organization, or Supreme Being is often a component of rationalizing and justifying the tragedy and sadness they have endured.

Although it is only natural to assign blame post-disaster, I think that in blaming volunteer organizations for their delayed relief, victims often forget the incredibly important things being done by such groups. They provide people with emotional and physical aid and afford them the opportunity for stress-related growth. Throughout this "Religious Responses to Disaster" class, I have read about numerous individuals who were able to persevere through horrible disasters because of the kindness and aid of others. Rabbi Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, was crushed after his son died at a young age (Kushner 1983). He has been able

to move past the event and cope with the loss of his son because of the overwhelming fellowship he received from his congregation, friends, and family. They were not able to take away his pain or reverse the tragic event, but their words of love and encouragement enabled Kushner to remain a positive and religious individual.

Similarly, Ama Adhe (1999) lived through the tragic and disastrous Chinese Communist occupation of Tibet. She was captured and imprisoned at a young age and spent most of her life in prisons. She was tortured by Chinese officials numerous times and proclaimed a national enemy for having refused to inform the Communists of her involvement in aiding hidden Tibetans. Adhe survived the prisons and concentration camps due to her religious convictions and the support of fellow female prisoners. After torturous abuse, the women would band together and help each other. After Adhe was so severely beaten that she could not see or eat, fellow women prisoners fed her and tended to her wounds. Like Kushner, Adhe was empowered enough by the aid she received to survive her conditions.

The poor neighborhood in which I did community service for the second time stands as an example of what can happen in the face of disaster when victims are unable to find support and help in others. The residents we encountered looked sad; even the faces of the children we played with were tarnished with despair. Everyone looked as though they had been put through more than they could sustain—they simply looked tired. I am sure Kushner and Adhe both wore expressions of exhaustion throughout their horrendous ordeals as well. I only hope the residents of Violet, Louisiana have supportive friends and family who will help them through the devastation.

Unfortunately for the victims of disaster, though the physical destruction often initially seems unbearable, the late onset psychological implications of disaster are often far worse than the material damage. Victims of disaster rely on the support of others to help bring them out of the devastation and depression they endure. Without the compassion and encouragement from others, disaster victims are likely to view their situations as being more dire than they are. Relief organizations help provide a necessary sense of security and guidance for survivors of disaster; without the aid provided by such groups, victims may be unable to overcome and move past the ramifications of the tragedy.

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