

New Orleans Log

Summer 2008

Saturday, June 28 - 11:59 pm

The Youth Van and Patmobile arrived safe and sound in New Orleans tonight. We were greeted with great news: His Hands 2 Go, which provides our volunteer housing, has a new shower trailer! When we were here in January there were 2 showers shared between about 30 volunteers. This time there are 8 showers to be shared between 40 volunteers. The ratio is getting much better! (Granted, you have to walk outside to get to the trailer, and there is no water temperature control, but hey, when you're dripping with sweat and dirt, a shower's a shower.)

Other great news: we can already see improvements in New Orleans East. Two stores that were vacant in January are now open for business!

Tomorrow we'll have a chance to drive around in daylight and survey the area. We'll also go to mass at St Maria Goretti and are looking forward to seeing Sr Lou again.

Sunday, June 30, 2008

Today was a very busy day. We started with a driving tour of the 9th Ward. The Lower 9th, an area closest to one of the levee failures, has been mostly bulldozed. Now it is acres and acres of empty lots. The Upper 9th is still mostly standing, but it is full of homes that are structurally damaged and boarded up. It is also the home of Musicians' Village, a joint project between Harry Connick Jr, Wynton Marsalis and Habitat for Humanity to build homes for low-income musicians. The 70 houses are simple, but beautifully painted and the neighborhood is like an oasis in the middle of miles of dilapidation.

Next we went to mass at St Maria Goretti. The music for that mass was sung by a gospel choir of about 25 young people. The music was beautiful and the singers were so good they could have been professional. St Maria Goretti is now online at www.smgnola.com.

Later, we watched an Imax movie called *Hurricane on the Bayou*. It introduces viewers to New Orleans' fiddle prodigy Amanda Shaw and follows her family through their experience of Hurricane Katrina while focusing on the importance of the Louisiana wetlands. It's educational, but it also features great music, beautiful scenery, and live footage from Hurricane Katrina. The movie is excellent, and I highly recommend it.

After the movie we ate at the Hard Rock Cafe where a band called Simple Plan was giving a free concert. If you're like me, you've never heard of them, but if you're a high school girl the thought of seeing them live throws you into an ecstatic screaming frenzy—I know because we have four such girls on our trip.

The concert proved to be a lot of fun. Now it's time to get a good night's sleep for a full day of painting and dry wall tomorrow.

PS If you want to know who Simple Plan is, watch this <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gawcyODiKIs>

Wednesday evening, June 2, 2008

We've had three workdays so far and each has been very hard work. Crew 1 has worked at the same house all three days so far. They have done exterior and interior painting and fenced in a yard. Crew 2 spent the first day hanging drywall—on the ceiling! The second day they gutted parts of a house and cleaned out a garage that was stuffed waist-high with water damaged papers, toys, tools, newspapers, etc. I didn't think we'd ever even find the floor, but by the time we finished, the garage was clean and swept. Today that crew treated a house for mold, which is dirty, hot, tedious work, but they got through it with music, humor, and determination (and a brief siesta at lunch time).

It turns out Sr Lou is ill this week, so we haven't seen her at all. She has been having heart problems lately and is waiting to find out if she will need open-heart surgery. Please keep her in your prayers.

Although we haven't seen her, Sr Lou did manage to get us a home-cooked dinner. She knew that Sinceria, a wonderful parishioner at St Maria Goretti, loves to cook. So Sister had Sinceria make dinner for us tonight. It was Crawfish Monica and it was delicious! I heard a couple of teens say that they generally don't like seafood, but that they really enjoyed this.

Thursday, July 3, 2008

Today crews 1 & 2 worked together on the same house. It needed mold remediation and also to have the attic and shed cleaned out. Crew 2 was more than happy to teach Crew 1 how to do mold remediation, the dirty tedious job they had been stuck with the day before. Luckily, this house was much smaller and we had more people, so the mold job was finished soon enough.

This house took on several feet of water during the flooding after Katrina and, while we were cleaning out the shed, we found a big storage tub sitting on the floor that still contained Katrina sludge. The storage tub also contained a set of china, which the owner wanted to save. Kudos to our diligent volunteers who were able to wash off those dishes without succumbing to the nauseating stench.

Another set of diligent volunteers cleaned out the attic, which seemed like a fun dirty job in the morning, but became a test of strength and will power as outdoor temperatures went into the mid-90s and the attic turned into an oven. After carrying out odds and ends like old speakers, blankets, and Christmas decorations from the attic, they also had to pull out the black, moldy insulation. By the time they got down from the attic, those volunteers looked like chimney sweeps.

The four high school girls who are with us on this trip have taken on male alter egos to help them sum up the strength for any job requiring a lot of muscle. Emily, Richele, Kelly, and Malia have become Bill Ovaload, Hank the Tank, Beef, and Stan the Man. They've managed to balance hard work and hysterical man-antics all week.

Friday, July 4, 2008

Last night we had a prayer service at St Luke's Assembly of God Church. The prayer service is meant for volunteers to process their experience in New Orleans and to give testimony to how they have seen God throughout the week. However, just as we were getting started a family of 8

walked into the back of church and asked to speak to the pastor. It turns out that a son in their family had just been arrested for shooting and killing his girlfriend. They came to the church looking for comfort and prayers. It sounds as if the shooting had been in the news, but without a tv or newspaper we hadn't heard anything about it. Pastor Teresa ushered the family to the front of the church and gathered all 40 volunteers around them as we laid hands on them in prayer. It was truly a humbling and eye-opening experience. That family had never been to this church before. They had never met Pastor Teresa. But somehow, in what must have been their darkest night, the family showed up on our doorstep at a moment when we were gathered together in love and prayer and openness. It was extraordinary.

Saturday, July 5, 2008

Yesterday was such a full day it felt like three days squeezed into one. We worked until noon doing mold remediation and yard work and then set out to enjoy our 4th of July.

First we went out to Jean LaFitte Park for a swamp tour. Our boat was called The Swamp Lady and our tour guide was a surly Cajun who we couldn't understand. But once we got out on the water and we adjusted to his accent, he turned out to be a lot of fun, and he really seemed to know everything about the area. The swamp was beautiful, with Live Oaks draped in Spanish Moss, exotic flowers, spooky Cypress trees, buzzing dragonflies, elegant egrets...and, of course, ALLIGATORS! This is where our surly, funny, knowledgeable Cajun tour guide turned into Louisiana's version of Steve Irwin (The Crocodile Hunter). He called the alligators over to our boat by tossing marshmallows to them and shouting "Ici! Vini ici!" which means "Come here" in French. (Yes, it seems alligators prefer French.). When the alligators got within reach he would bop them on the nose to get them to open and chomp their long powerful jaws. Next he held raw chickens out at arms length about three feet above the water to make the alligators leap for the tasty snacks. At one point he caught an alligator by the tail so we could see it roll and thrash about trying to escape. It is amazing that this guy still has all his fingers!

After the swamp tour we stopped for po'boys (Louisiana's submarine sandwiches) and then went to a party at Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World. Mardi Gras World is a great big warehouse where Mardi Gras parade floats are designed, built and painted. This is a place that words can't describe. Larger than life figures line the walls. Superman, Dr. Evil, Paul Bunyan, griffins, angels, witches, Pan, Jack and the Beanstalk, kings, court jesters, zebras, charioteers, trains, Santa Claus and Sock'em Bop'em Robots, all compete for your attention as they wait to be touched up and mounted to a float or recycled into something new.

Amidst all this was a 4th of July party with a DJ, food and drinks, and face painters. Mr. Kern, the founder and owner of Mardi Gras World, was there, too. I couldn't get over what a nice guy he was. He walked around introducing himself to anyone at the party and when he found out that we were on a mission trip he took me by the hand and thanked me with genuine sincerity. At 8:30 a brass band replaced the DJ and led a second line parade around the warehouse, through the parking lot and up the levee to the West Bank of the Mississippi River where we sat down and enjoyed a big fireworks display.

That brings us to the end of our trip. We left New Orleans this morning at 7:30. As I write this we are somewhere in Alabama heading up I-59. We've got 9 teens plus 3 adults and luggage squeezed into our 12-passenger van—it's nearly bursting at the seams. The kids are sleeping, piled on top of each other like puppies. About 8 hours to Cincinnati. What a great trip!

Sunday, July 06, 2008

We made it home safe and sound from our trip to New Orleans, getting in last night around 11:30pm. Whew! Long drive, but great trip. Thanks to all of you for your prayers, financial support, and words of encouragement!

I'm hoping to compile a complete and edited photo album with pictures from all the volunteers, but if you'd like a sneak peek at my photos, click here:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/JeanneCSchaefer/NewOrleansSummer08>

I've been on a lot of mission trips and as each trip nears its end, I always wonder what I can do to keep the experience from that one week real and relevant for the rest of my life. I found the following reflection, written by Max Lucado, to be a commitment to making that happen. I shared it with our volunteers on our last day in New Orleans, and I thought our Quicklets readers might enjoy it as well.

Your New Orleans Correspondent,
Jeanne Schaefer

The Choice

As today begins I choose how to live my life...

I choose love...

No occasion justifies hatred, no injustice warrants bitterness. I choose love. Today I will love God and what God loves.

I choose joy...

I will invite God to be the God of circumstance. I will refuse the temptation to be cynical... the tool of a lazy thinker. I will refuse to see people as anything less than human beings, created by God. I will refuse to see any problem as anything less than an opportunity to see God.

I choose peace...

I will live forgiven. I will forgive so that I may live.

I choose patience...

I will overlook the inconveniences of the world. Instead of accusing the one of taking my place, I'll invite him to do so. Rather than complain that the wait is too long, I will thank God for a moment to pray. Instead of clenching my fist at new assignments, I will face them with joy and courage.

I choose kindness...

I will be kind to the poor, for they are alone. Kind to the rich, for they are afraid. And I will be kind to the unkind, for such is how God has treated me.

I choose goodness...

I will go without a dollar before I take a dishonest one. I will be overlooked before I will boast. I will confess before I will accuse. I choose goodness.

I choose faithfulness...

Today I will keep my promises. My friends will not question my word.

I choose gentleness...

Nothing is won by force. I choose to be gentle. If I raise my voice may it only be in praise. If I clench my fist may it only be in prayer. If I make a demand, may it only be of myself.

I choose self-control...

I am a spiritual being. After this body is dead, my spirit will soar. I refuse to let what will rot, rule the eternal. I choose self-control. I will be drunk only by joy. I will be impassioned only by my faith. I will be influenced only by God. I will be taught only by Christ.

To these I commit my day. If I succeed, I will give thanks. If I fail, I will seek God's grace. And then, when my day is done, I will place my head on my pillow and rest.

TOMORROW IS ANOTHER CHANCE!