

Paul's Trip to New Orleans, November 10-17, 2007

It's a national shame - to see the ruined conditions, the boarded up houses, the neighborhoods with 20 % occupancy compared to pre-Katrina. It made us angry - at the national government that continues to spend billions in destroying Iraq; billions that could have been spent on our own taxpayers' needs at home. It made us upset - that the billions that **have** been sent to New Orleans from the Federal Government have done so little, and made us wonder where all that money went and to whom? We were happy - to see the smiling faces that walked by our job sites, surely not everyone but many, who had gotten past the anger and dismay and were building their lives back up again. We were blessed - to have wonderful Christian brothers and sisters with whom we lived and worked and worshiped and caroused during our week together.

Heidi, Nancy, Susan and Paul from Hingham; Rich, Randy, Bill, and Bruce from Auburn; two couples - Mark and Sandra, Richard and Deb - John and his father Dan, Jane, Jeanne, Judy, Lillie, Gwen, Mary from Middleboro; Barbara from Sutton, and leaders Shantia and 'Nette from the UCC out of Worcester, MA were those wonderful, dedicated people who lived together in the donated space of the building next to the sanctuary of the Church of the Good Shepherd in next-suburb-out Metairie.

That church had been flooded with two feet of water in their sanctuary. Stop for a minute and actually envision two feet of water in your own home and in your own church building ----- Really, picture it in your mind -----Not too good, eh? Think of your TV, kitchen table, couches and chairs, all your cabinets, under not just water but a nasty fluid of mud, sewage, rain, gasoline, and more.

We arrived at our host church with the final touches of sealing their replacement floor having just been done days before. Our gift to them was painting several walls of the refurbished building and assembling 10 sets of bunk beds (the plans for which I had designed before we left for the trip). The men slept in 2 modular buildings that the church had acquired, on cots when we first arrived and later on the bunk beds we made. The new bunks doubled the sleeping capacity of the outbuildings for future workers, and, with the air mattresses, were far more comfortable than the cots had been. The women slept on cots in the main building, a sort of gymnasium plus.

A little background to understand the overall situation:

Picture yourself in a church with the raised platform of the altar in front of you. Walk forward and jump up on the altar platform, looking back down at the lower level from which you came on the main church floor. You are now at water level in New Orleans in this raised position. Now jump back down to the main (lower level) of the church floor with all the pews. You are now at the housing level where we were rebuilding houses. Something is wrong with this picture, isn't it? The house we worked on last, owned by Andre whom we met and to whom we talked extensively, was in the famous lower ninth ward at 2929 Orleans Avenue. Since we had no bathroom facility in the house we were fixing, we got in the car to find one. We drove flat for a bit, drove **up** an incline to get to the water level of the canal we had to cross, drove up higher to do the bridge, and drove **down** the other side to get back to the level we were on from the other side. Crazy!

A little bit about the predominant architecture of the city of New Orleans:

Most of the homes were in the architectural style known as “shotgun” houses. The basic idea is that you can open the front door, shoot a gun through the open doorway, and the bullet would exit the open rear door of the house cleanly without hitting anything in between. This is because the rooms line up one behind the other, front to back, rather than the style to which we are accustomed with rooms side by side as well as front to back. On Orleans Avenue where we worked Wednesday to Friday, as well as at the two other houses we worked on Monday and Tuesday, most homes were unoccupied despite the over two years since Katrina. Andre had just recently returned, after being shipped (with no choice on his part) to housing in another state, It had taken him two years to get back. This story was echoed over and over again.

The first house we worked on was a double shotgun, occupied pre-Katrina by four generations of family and owned by Vera Lewis, the matriarch at 96 who lived there with her extended family. We met the middle two women, Vera's daughter and granddaughter, and we assumed the great grandchildren were in school. The neighborhood was tough, and, despite our daily routine of saying hi to anyone we met anywhere from the street corner to the Home Depot, the people were withdrawn here as opposed to the friendly and responsive nature of those in Andre's neighborhood.

The way the reconstruction is working with the UCC is as follows:

The homeowner signed over their insurance settlement check to the United Church of Christ to set up an account for materials. They then received free labor from the UCC work crews to finish the house. A few UCC construction supervisors visited the sites to help get us going in the morning. They then left us alone to do the work, coming back during or at the end of the day to check that it was done right. They also had to take all of the tools out of the houses every day after work for fear of them getting stolen that evening. With no electricity, this included the diesel power generators and the electric compressor we used as well.

I had the great fortune of being in a crew of four that got along wonderfully and worked extremely well together: I was with Heidi, Dan, and Barbara. Heidi was from the Hingham Church, and proved to be a valuable worker despite coming with modest carpentry skills. Her job evolved into using a small nail gun to attach brackets that tied the main structure of the building to the roof to prevent the roof blowing off in a future hurricane. She finished the entire house in the three days we were at that site. Barbara, the lone representative from her church in Sutton, MA, brought good carpentry skills with her that she had learned working with her dad when she was young. She became the skill saw operator and did most of the cutting of the boards. She was impassioned about the cause and spent time with Andre, especially, hearing his story and giving him support. Dan was a professional carpenter who built houses. We all had the good sense to defer to him in all decisions and I ended up being his assistant on the building phase, acquiring the role of king of the big nail gun. My favorite project was measuring, cutting, and power nailing in a complicated pattern to take into account all of the things jutting out from the side wall into the floor area for the plywood floor in the bathroom we were re-building.

A lot of the work we did was termite-damage repair. We would size up the studs or plates (one plate going above and horizontally across the vertical-going 2" by 4" studs, and one going horizontally across the studs at the bottom) as well as any of the floor joists or other assorted boards that are part of the construction of a house. When we determined which ones needed replacing, Dan would use a sawsall to cut out the offending boards. While I did whatever he needed done to accomplish this, the women would go to Home Depot or Lowe's to get replacement pressure-treated lumber, and Dan, Heidi, Barbara, or I would nail-gun the 2x4's in place.

The most challenging job was at the Tuesday house, owned by Renetta whom we didn't meet. This was also termite repair, but the need was the top plate. The top plate is the main board that runs along under the entire roof on that side of the house, so it was a bit tricky. We had difficulty moving a funny set of nailed boards that we had to get out of the way to do the repair. We soon realized its purpose, and used this as a brace for the ceiling joists to hold up the roof, which allowed Dan to cut out the top plate without the whole house collapsing. He slid in the new 2X4 plate and nailed it in place at the top of all of the 12 foot studs (yes, the walls were that high, to allow the heat to rise and have the cooler air settle by the floor to make it bearable in summer). We then pulled out the brace and, presto, we had a good strong structure where there had been a shaky one before.

The rest of the main entourage of 23 people was divided into two other groups: the "deconstructors" that did the nasty and necessary job of yanking out termite-infested walls, ceilings, etc and shoveling out mud and worse from between the studs to prepare the houses they worked on for a crew to come in and do the next stage of reconstruction. The third group was composed of cooks/teachers, who cooked our delicious evening meals and visited the schools to do one-on-one tutoring. Nancy, from HCC, had her own mission in helping people get benefits and breaks they were due and deserved. As a FEMA employee for her regular job, her work here proved to be a valuable aspect of what the group as a whole accomplished in our week there.

On Friday night, we went out to the French Quarter in New Orleans. I wasn't too keen on it at first, as if it were not right to have fun with all the suffering around us. I put this foolishness behind me and joined the group that had been so good to me and for me for the entire week. Our subgroup went to Snug Harbor, a large establishment that had a back room set up in a concert setting for Ellis Marsalis, father of Wynton and Brandon and two other sons, one of whom played percussion in Ellis's band. Dan and I were falling asleep listening to the mellow sounds of this band, so we dragged Heidi along with us and went across the street to listen to a fabulous Dixieland quintet that was playing in a smaller bar. It consisted of clarinet, tuba, sax, trombone, and banjo. They played energetic music, and were followed by a second band that we also enjoyed. I liked it so much I ended up putting \$40.00 in the tip jar (hope Mom doesn't read this). Heidi and I finished off our evening on the town dancing in the street outside the bar to the music emanating from within (while Dan laughed, I'm sure). We had

earlier called the work camp group leader to cancel our ride back with the group, and took a cab home an hour after everyone else.

What did I bring home?

A desire to return, a hope to involve some of my friends and acquaintances to return with me, and a drive to get some money to help these people.

Paul