

Newsday.com

HELPING KATRINA VICTIMS

With hearts and hands

Adults, teens from LI churches join wave of volunteers helping coastal poor recover

BY RHODA AMON

rhoda.amon@newsday.com

April 15, 2007

When the floodwater receded, Kathleen Boatman found her recipe book in the mud. That was all she found. The book's location and a mail post showed her where her home had been before Hurricane Katrina's 30-foot surge swept across the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August 2005, leaving miles of solitary posts that once had supported people's homes.

The 76-year-old woman, more fortunate than most, now has a sturdy new house farther inland, in the tiny town of Kiln. It was built in a week in January by six volunteers.

"We knew we had to go there and do something," said Colin Woodhouse, 59, of Great Neck, who organized the volunteers, ranging in age from the 50s to 72.

Last weekend Woodhouse's daughter, Alexandra, 17, returned from New Orleans with 25 other Long Island youths, 13 to 17, who spent their spring break helping clean up devastated neighborhoods.

The young people, accompanied by nine adults, were part of the JustWorks program of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. That international human rights group partnered with ACORN, a New Orleans-based national grassroots organization for improving the lives of lower-income people, and Common Ground, a restoration group also working in the area.

The adult team led by Colin Woodhouse, which was part of UUSC and included two building contractors, chose to work on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where their building skills would be more useful, said Woodhouse, a

financial adviser with construction experience. New Orleans is still more in the cleanup stage, he said.

Both Long Island work groups said they were struck by the enormity of the tragedy for the poor residents who still have far to go to rebuild their lives.

"But there are signs of hope," said the Rev. Barry Andrews, minister for religious education for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock in Manhasset. He cited the thousands of volunteers from around the country and the grateful people eager to move ahead.

Alexandra Woodhouse helped clean out a former bakery that was being converted to a storefront church when disaster struck the long-neglected Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans.

"The minister came and thanked us over and over for our work. He said his wife and 2-month-old grandson died in the storm," said Alexandra, a member of the youth group at the Shelter Rock congregation. The Manhasset group was joined by young people from the UU Fellowship at Stony Brook and the Unitarian South Nassau Church in Freeport.

While helping gut a storm-damaged house, they found a family photograph amid the debris, said Latifa Woodhouse, Alexandra's mother and one of the group's adult advisers. That led to a call to a young man who once had lived there and still did not know what had happened to members of his family. "He told us that [picture] was his family," she said. "So many lives were devastated."

90,000 student hours

The students talked to neighborhood children who still had very few schoolbooks and no home phones, said Kristin Johnson, 17, of Roslyn. But Charlotte Foster, 17, and her parents, Ellen and Stephen of Flushing, were impressed by "the spirit of the people who had lost everything," Ellen Foster said.

Students on spring break from around the country provided 90,000 volunteer hours in neighborhood cleanup, said Sara Albee, fundraising director for ACORN (www.acorn.org). "They're helping families to begin the rebuilding process and come back to New Orleans, which is our ultimate goal," she said.

ACORN, which stands for the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, recently built two homes in the Lower Ninth Ward, the first new construction in that impoverished area since 1985, Albee said.

The Long Island teenagers, working in 80-degree heat, tore down drywalls, pulled nails out of studs, and carted and sorted debris. ACORN provided safety coveralls, ventilator masks, goggles, leather work gloves and lots of water. The group bunked in one large room in a New Orleans Methodist church.

By contrast, the smaller Mississippi team shared a prefab unit in Camp Coastal Outpost, a makeshift compound formed by volunteers in the tiny town of Kiln. The team's first job was to

correct measurement errors made by previous volunteers that would have made the home construction impossible, said Thomas O'Connor, 54, of Merrick, a home remodeling specialist.

The group recruited by Colin Woodhouse also included building contractor Klaus Masuch, 56, of Oyster Bay, and Wally Brown, 72, a computer languages teacher on a break between semesters at Queensborough Community College. The men, members of the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock, were joined by two other volunteers, Brenda Carpenter, 54, a former Army captain from Forest Hills, and Barbara Elgin of Leesburg, Va.

At 76, a first-time homeowner

Working dawn 'til dark, they framed, sheathed and roofed a 16-by-48-foot bungalow - no mansion, but comfortable and deeply appreciated by Kathleen Boatman, who said she rented previously and had "never owned a whole house before," Brown said. During construction, Boatman, 76, lived nearby in a Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer. Her daughter, who has cancer, lived in another trailer with her husband, who survived on his damaged shrimp boat, and their twin teenage daughters.

Masuch, who said he got mad when he heard how little the government was doing to help poor people rebuild, said he was heartened by the stream of volunteers pouring into the devastated area. "We're a nation of people who help each other," he said.

Gwendolyn Adams, 55, ACORN's Lower Ninth Ward co-chairwoman, whose home was razed by the city, expressed similar feelings after seeing the teens at work. "It's beautiful," she said. "It restores your faith in human nature."

Copyright 2007 Newsday Inc.