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Contact

Melissa Weber, Director of Communications  
Phone: 320-589-6414, weberm@morris.umn.edu

Jenna Ray, Editor/Writer  
Phone: 320-589-6068, jrray@morris.umn.edu

## **Hurricane cleanup during Spring Break**

*Summary: University of Minnesota, Morris students who helped with hurricane cleanup efforts in Slidell, Louisiana, during Spring Break 2006 report the experience was "invaluable."*

(March 30, 2006)-In the midst of muck, mold and devastation, 2006 Spring Breakers who participated in a UMM Lutheran Campus Ministry-sponsored service trip witnessed unwavering compassion, touching generosity and amazing human spirit. Fourteen students and LCM Pastor Kristine Braaten-Lee traveled 30 hours by van to Slidell, Louisiana, to help with Hurricane Katrina cleanup efforts. Their days were filled with "muckin'". Their hearts were filled with memories.

The group's "home-away-from-home" was Peace Lutheran Church in Slidell. After Hurricane Katrina ravaged the area, the congregation decided to support the rebuilding effort by becoming a bed and breakfast of sorts for relief workers, providing five sleeping rooms, bunk beds and bedding, hot showers, a kitchen and a lounge for relaxing. In addition to UMMers, three families, all volunteers, also stayed at the church. The residents shared meals and took turns preparing meals for each other.

The UMMers received their "work orders" at the Lutheran Disaster Relief camp located nearby. Susan Seim '07, Maple Grove, stated that the volunteers staying at this camp had a very different living experience. "It looked like an army camp, with tents, mobile showers and Porta Potties," she stated. Over 200 volunteers are headquartered at the camp.

The UMM group was assigned six homes to clean, but even the coordinator who gave them their work orders knew the assignment was virtually impossible, telling them: "Just do as much as you can while you are here." They also received their protective garments and equipment at the camp: knee-high rubber boots elbow-length latex gloves goggles bandanas respirators and "moon suits" made of waterproof materials. Duct tape was also supplied, so that the openings in their clothing could be securely closed with tape. The workers were completely sealed into their clothing. "And you needed every bit of it," notes Erica Dolven-Kolle, St. Joseph.

The two homes they cleaned in St. Bernard Parish had been covered in 12 feet of floodwater and had not been touched since the hurricanes. Six inches of "muck," a combination of mud and sewage, covered everything. "And," shares Dolven-Kolle, "anything that held water did."

Helen and Vernon, whom the students affectionately remember, own the first home. "The first thing we dragged out of their house was the couch," remembers Seim. "We threw away just about everything in their house—clothes, dishes, drywall. We took it down to the studs, exterior brick walls and cement." At first the couple was in total disbelief, but later, as the students began to find salvageable remnants from their previous lives, they began to focus on what remained instead of what was lost. Much to Vernon and Helen's surprise, the students found a few pieces of jewelry in the muck, and even a few wedding pictures that were not completely destroyed.

The work was physically challenging, but the students were energized and motivated by Vernon and Helen's

appreciation. “They were incredibly generous—providing po’ boys for lunch (a Southern sandwich that the students will never forget) and donuts in the morning. They even gave us a donation when we left that we will put towards our service trip next year,” stated Seim and Dolven-Kolle. When Helen and Vernon’s house was stripped bare, ready for the sanitation crew to spray the entire dwelling with bleach, the group said goodbye with hugs and promises to stay in touch.

The second and final home where the group worked provided a different perspective into Hurricane Katrina aftermath. The homeowners did not wish to be a part of the cleanup effort. The husband expressed his appreciation on the day they arrived, but family members did not watch the process as did Helen and Vernon.

While they were often exhausted after each day’s work, the group did find time to explore beyond St. Bernard’s Parish and Slidell on the weekend. A drive through Ward Nine, where no cleanup efforts have yet to be initiated, was sobering, and a trip to New Orleans’ French Quarter, only 45 miles away, proved to be a dramatic contrast to their working conditions.

The students reflect: “On Sunday we walked around the French Quarter and tried Cajun foods. It was very different than in St. Bernard’s Parish. Where we were working, there are very few businesses open. Gas stations are limited. Roads are still blocked by trees downed by the hurricane. And even finding a bathroom is a challenge. In the French Quarter, there are no worries about gasoline or electricity. Everything is open. The only evidence of the devastation is shops selling Hurricane Katrina T-shirts.”

The LCM trip, which was open to all members of the UMM community, incorporated the faith traditions of all the participants during worship every evening. “As the trip went on, we realized the importance of the faith factor to us and to the people we served,” stated Seim.

That sentiment was illustrated on their last evening in Slidell, when the volunteers decided to venture out for a final adventure. Their spirits lifted as they joined local residents at a dance featuring zydeco music, a traditional genre originating in southern Louisiana. “It is great dance music,” shared Seim and Dolven-Kolle with enthusiasm. While they had great fun dancing the two-step, the students’ lasting impression of the evening, and of their entire trip, revolves around the people with whom they shared the music. “They’ve lost everything, but their morale is still high. The people still have their faith,” stated Dolven-Kolle.

“This trip was an invaluable experience,” shared Seim. “We are a bit sheltered in Morris. In classes we hear about things going on in other places, but we don’t have the visual picture. Experiences like this trip cement those ideas. And the trip makes me value my education. Where we worked, we drove by their high school. There’s no school in session. People live there.”

Participants on the LCM Spring Break trip to Slidell, Louisiana, included: Susan Seim, Maple Grove, Erica Dolven-Kolle, St. Joseph, Dan Ekerholm, Minneapolis, Jake Hansmeier, Foley, Tyson Mastin, Blue Earth, Matt Johantgen, Ramsey, Missy Rynerson, Richfield, Ruth Olson, New Ulm, Nicky Kaehler, Brookfield, Wisconsin, Erin Wunderlich, Royalton, Amanda Norgren, Rockford, Sara Russell, Duluth, Steve Sebald, Rochester, Emily Ashworth, Roseville, and Pastor Kristine Braaten-Lee.

For more LCM trip pictures, click [here](#).

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