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Volunteers recruited by the UConn Community Outreach program help to clean up a badly damaged house. The volunteers worked at 30 sites over a five-day period in early January.

Picking Up The Pieces

UConn Volunteers Spend Week Helping Hurricane Victims

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The charter bus pulled into a gas station near the Gulf Coast on a Sunday afternoon ending the exhausting 30-hour road trip. The students, eager to leave their stale cushion seats, began walking toward the shore, as the roads were far too hazardous to be navigating in such a clunky vehicle. Silence fell on the group as the realities of Hurricane Katrina rose from the mangled Mississippi grounds and quickly sank into their hearts. This was not going to be the average winter break.

These students had been recruited by the UConn Community Outreach program which, in partnership with Catholic Relief Services, organized a trip for volunteers to spend a week of their vacation cleaning up the hurricane devastated Mississippi coastal area. A total of 49 students and five staff members left the Connecticut cold on Saturday, Jan. 7 for an experience that would change their lives.

"There was nothing left," said Robert Palin, a volunteer and graduate student, reflecting on his first impressions of the area. "Pictures you see on the TV don't really show you how massive this disaster really is. It's one thing to see the damage one picture at a time, but it's another to have it everywhere you look."

Though five months passed since the hurricane, the state of many coastline areas remained uninhabitable. As the volunteers witnessed different families still sleeping in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers and eating food supplied by the Red Cross they felt as if they stumbled across another world - this couldn't have been America.

"It really hits you between the eyes when you see it in front of you," Palin said. "I was amazed. It looked like it just hit and everyone was really moved by the scene. It really made you think of all the work that still needs to be done."

Gina DeVivo Brassaw, program advisor for Community Outreach, helped coordinate the trip by connecting different organizations, making this the largest scale trip in the Community Outreach Program's history. Past volunteer trips usually limited the number of recruits, but for this time recruiting was opened up to whoever wanted to help in the clean-up process.

"We only had three weeks to recruit everyone and the trip filled up right away," Brassaw said. "I don't know of

any other public school that had this many volunteers down there."

Each volunteer paid \$300 to cover food and transportation expenses for the week. The group stayed at the DeDeaux Retreat House in the town of Pass Christian, free of cost.

"Community Outreach won't do anything bigger than the Mississippi trip this year," said Matt Farley, Community Outreach coordinator, who helped lead the volunteers through the week. "It was one of the most important things I've ever done with my life."

Everyday the volunteers would wake up in the DeDeaux, eat breakfast, split up into teams and head to different work sites to clear and repair various properties. The students worked on about 30 separate sites over a five-day work period.

"After a good day's work you would usually be all scratched up from the branches and sore from lifting things all day," he said.

As each day wined down, the exhausted volunteers would regroup at the DeDeaux in the evenings and relaxed with the help of card games and television. Student leaders like Devika Dhandapani, coordinator of Alternative Breaks and Emergence Program for Community Outreach and a 6th-semester biology major, would start "reflection" discussions where the students and staff could talk about their experiences throughout the days. The discussions drew laughter and tears from the volunteers as their surroundings became not only a burden on their bodies, but their minds.

"You needed some outlet when you worked in those conditions," Dhandapani said. "There was no way you could do all that work without talking about it."

Everyone took turns to speak as the reflection sessions helped the students get through the week while promoting friendship and understanding. Palin said the trip brought him closer to his peers and made him realize the value of their heart-wrenching efforts.

"They were probably some of the best people I'll ever meet," he said. "Everybody worked really hard and they busted their tails everyday. We worked really well as a group."

Dhandapani said the toughest part of the work was talking to the families and listening to their survival stories as they joined hands in cleaning out their damaged homes. Stories of elderly women clinging to a medicine ball from their garage to float in the floodwaters as they watched their lives wash away in the furious storm. Stories that entailed the everyday communities where people had spent their entire lives until everything was taken away.

"Some families had nothing and they'd still buy us lunch as we worked and be so appreciative of our help," she said.

The more students talked to the survivors, the more they made connections and realized most of them would never return to their hometowns. The damage was too much to simply continue where they were and many of the families discussed plans of starting over in distant towns.

Palin said he was inspired by the good health and faith of the locals as they remained grateful for what was left. The families were unexpectedly cheerful for the living conditions they endured, surviving on the aid they received from various parts of the world.

"That's why I did it, not for myself, but to help others," he said. "I got the most out of showing the people we helped that there is still good out there."

On his last day in Mississippi, Palin cleaned out a heavily damaged home where only wall studs were left

standing in the ravaged interior. At this point he realized his help was only temporary and there was still much to be done. The area is making progress, roads have been cleared and stores are slowly opening again, but no single group of volunteers will be able to fix everything.

"People shouldn't forget about what happened," Palin said. "It's been five months and though the media isn't covering the area as much, it doesn't mean it's over."

The volunteers packed up and stepped back onto the bus headed back home on Friday, Jan. 13. Many were left tired and bruised from the week of the manual labor, but none left without a new perspective on their lives back in Connecticut.

Dhandapani said everyone formed relationships with each other and the bus ride back was very different from the previous 30-hour road trip. The bus was loud; students switched in and out of seats to laugh and reminisce as the next time they would all be together was uncertain. This ride seemed much shorter.

Upon arrival, the students had two days before the spring semester began and they would all go into the new year with a spiritual experience beneath their belts. All of the volunteers Brassaw spoke with since the trip said their stay in Mississippi changed their lives.

"People realize that they have to do more with their lives after seeing families just like their own in such those scenarios," Brassaw said. "It can be shocking to come back and try to get back into your normal lifestyles."

Dhandapani said her volunteer work brought her back to her roots. She had been obsessed with her grades and studies in the School of Medicine and the experience made her realize why she originally picked the major - to help people. Now with a new outlook on life, Dhandapani will not go to Hawaii with her friends this summer, but is signing up to continue volunteer work in developing Caribbean countries.

Brassaw is currently assessing resources to coordinate another trip to the Gulf Coast.

"We are hoping to pull together a trip to New Orleans for Spring Break," Brassaw said.

Palin was sad to leave the families in Mississippi with so much work left undone. The memories of strong hearted survivors and the volunteers coming together for the benefit of humanity are ones he will remember for the rest of his life, but he knows the road of progress is a long one and the end is still sits in a distance.

"It won't be over for a long time," Palin said. "People down there kept telling us the same thing when we were leaving, 'Don't forget about us.'"

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