

New Orleans Reflections, January 2007

Shirah Caputo

Whenever you see something on the news, there's something of a mental block; a filter, leaving you slightly desensitized from what you're seeing.

When I walked into our first house, I thought I was passing through a nuclear warzone. There wasn't an ounce of color left in the house. Entire rooms were in other rooms, and next to nothing was salvageable. I tried to wrap my head around the idea that the houses we saw were in one CITY; this hurricane did the same thing to houses across three STATES. As proud as I was of all the work we did, and the many lives we touched, I'm haunted by the things I've seen, and the idea that so many more people need help. It's a seemingly unmanageable and incredibly daunting task, to try to put so many lives back together.

At the same time, as much as money helps, I feel we did more in the week that we were there than some people have given in their lives. We were able to meet the victims, to put our arms around them, and reassure them that not everyone has forgotten them; some of us are still listening, and care about what they're going through.

There isn't a doubt in my mind that I'm going to go back again. I've taken just as much from this experience as I've given, if not more.

Sasha Fass

The trip to New Orleans was truly a great time. When I signed up for it, I personally wasn't ready for what was in store for me. I guess it was hard to say I knew what to expect. As the date of arrival in New Orleans approached, I became more and more anxious. However, as soon as we got off the bus and arrived at Camp Blessing, I knew everything would be wonderful.

The trip had a wonderful effect on me. I came out with a result in only feeling better about myself, knowing that I personally helped out those in need. I know and understand that it's much 'easier said than done' when it comes down to doing things, but I can at least say I did a Mitzvah, and I certainly don't expect anything in return. Sometimes doing what you feel is right is the best thing you can do in life, and I think that's an important lesson I learned from this trip.

One of the most memorable parts about the trip would have to include the fact that everyone in the area, including the neighbors, is really sincere and thankful for the work that was done. At one of the houses, there was a friendly family across the street that told us their Katrina story, and it made me realize how lucky I am to have the family I have and the close people in my life. When she explained how her son didn't want to evacuate with her and her husband, all I could think about is what could have possibly been going through this young man's mind. It really makes you think about what you have and what you want. Did her son know that it was his time to go? Maybe he had some sort of gut feeling? Or maybe something else was telling him to stay back and let his parents go on without him. Regardless, this mother's experience has made me realize

how much people as a whole take things for granted. I feel as though I learned a lot during the time she was speaking with us. For that I am thankful in great amounts.

Just thinking back to how thankful people are is enough motivation for me to go back and help out in the Gulf Coast again in the near future. I am a strong believer in doing what makes you happy, and seeing the smiles on all those people's faces truly has touched me in a way that's hard to describe. All I know for sure is that I am excited about helping out in communities everywhere, even if it's in a way that's not as meaningful as my New Orleans experience.

Tracey Katof

"Knowledge = Responsibility"

I heard this quote at the "Save Darfur" Rally in NYC in September. This quote is the perfect explanation of why we do philanthropy and charity actions. I spent a significant part of my life distancing myself and just being unaware. It's true that I just didn't know what was going on, but there are two parties to blame.

The first is myself for not seeking out knowledge. As a Jew I have always felt for those victims in the Holocaust and have been quick to blame those individuals who didn't help. In high school, I still felt this way yet was unaware of another genocide that was currently taking place in Western Sudan. However, this time I was the person who turned my head and didn't help. I wish someone who was fully aware of what was happening communicated to me and my fellow peers in high school.

It's not enough to have knowledge floating around. You have to literally shove into people's faces and force them to realize what is happening. It sounds harsh, but I wish someone had done that to me! This is where the second party comes in.

The second party to blame for those who are unaware is those who know and don't share. "Knowledge = Responsibility" When you know the truth and when you witness pain, it becomes your responsibility to not only take action yourself, but to also spread the word and raise awareness.

I recently participated in a trip to New Orleans for Katrina relief work. I had assumed, like many other Americans, that people were probably rebuilding and receiving some aid from the government. Well I was wrong on both accounts! It was emotional and tragic to spend time in the neighborhoods that were ruined by Katrina. The few who are trying to rebuild have their families squeezed into trailers. The federal government, which has 400,000 grants to give to families, has given (after nearly 1 ½ years, mind you) only 100 families these grants.

The bottom line is that these people need help. They need volunteers willing to give up just one week. I, along with many other Hillel students in New York, were given the knowledge that everything is not okay in New Orleans. The city is actually far from okay. We received that knowledge and took on the responsibility to do something about it.

And what am I left with? I am left with one of the most fulfilling experiences I have ever had. These families lost everything which sometimes included family members

and pets. I am proud to say that I helped in providing a first step for those families to moving on and rebuilding.

Yoni Miller

The trip affected me tremendously. It made me realize the small things in life are extremely important and how precious life actually is since one day it can all be taken away from someone. In the homes we were gutting, looking at family pictures with mold and water stains made me realize that everything can be taken away from you at any moment and that we must cherish and be grateful for what we have.

This trip also made me realize that no matter what race or religion, everyone has the obligation to care for one another. Helping another Jew is great, and the Torah talks about helping “thy neighbor,” but a neighbor could also mean a fellow human being. The people in whose neighborhoods we worked were thanking me every single day with a smile and a wave of acknowledgement. This small thing gave me the greatest incentive to work even harder, since what I was actually doing was making a difference.

People may think what can one person do, how could I actually make a difference. I thought the same exact way before I went down to New Orleans, but this trip made me realize that an individual *can* make a difference. I single-handedly hastened the process for various people to get back into their homes. If I did not come down to the Gulf Coast, that would be one less person working on a house. This translates into more time being spent on one house, which means people getting back into their homes more quickly. Hence, one person makes a tremendous difference.

Nicole Neiman

Volunteering in New Orleans was a very meaningful experience. I signed up for this trip without really knowing what I was getting myself into, but by the end of our week in Louisiana, I was a changed person.

I learned how important and rewarding it is to give without always expecting something in return. I learned to be more optimistic, a contagious trait that I saw in every single person we talked to; Even though these people had lost all of their material belongings, they would never lose their hope and strength.

I learned and strengthened my understanding of the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world) and its significance. I learned a lot from all the speakers that came to talk to us, who shared their experiences and views regarding the complexity of the issue and increased my knowledge of the impact of Hurricane Katrina.

This trip had a great impact on my life. As I gutted each home I was, ironically, rebuilding someone’s life. To know that I was able to make a difference and brighten someone’s life is simply amazing.

Sarah Perlin

After participating on a trip to help rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, I came to realize that so many people are still in dire need of our help. Only about 200,000 people out of almost 500,000 citizens have had the opportunity and the resources to move

back to Louisiana to try and rebuild their lives, homes and future. We, as Americans, can not turn our backs on our fellow citizens.

Those who I had the opportunity to help and talk to are not only grateful for our help, but they are also so hopeful for the future. Their faith is extremely strong even with the knowledge that it will take more than five years to rebuild their towns, cities and state. However, they feel abandoned by America because after seventeen months, the volunteer groups get smaller and smaller, and the money that was allotted to help rebuild is not getting to them quickly enough.

We can not forget about New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. It is our responsibility as Americans to help, stand up for and protect those whose voices are becoming faint.