

New Orleans Reflections, March 2008

Arielle Devay

Mr. Green lives in a trailer in the lower 9th ward, New Orleans, Louisiana. Surrounding him are cement blocks, skeletons of where his neighbors' houses used to be. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina barreled through the gulf coast, breaking the levees that once held the Mississippi River back. Most affected by the levee breaches were inhabitants of the poor ghetto of the Lower 9th.

As a college student at Hofstra, I knew little about the current state of New Orleans after the treacherous disaster two and a half years ago. So I decided to help the clean up effort during my Spring Break with Hillel, and learned valuable lessons from down-and-out storm survivors.

During a bus tour of disaster areas, Mr. Green's lone trailer was the only structure on the whole block. It was surrounded by signs: "I am now home, I will rebuild, I am New Orleans." Flowers and a gravestone commemorate his dead wife and three year old grandchild. He climbed on our bus and thanked us for all we had done. His strength and determination on the eve of destruction deeply touched me. I am so glad I went on the alternative spring break. The experience has changed me forever.

Jenna Fishner

I have always wanted to make a change. In high school, I worked locally, raising money, volunteering, etc. but it was never good enough for me. I wanted to be hands on, share my smile with the world, let a stranger know that someone cared - that I cared. I had been looking for programs like this one for a while, so when I found about Hillel's Alternative Spring Break in New Orleans I knew I had to go.

When I told people I was going to New Orleans, they smiled and told me how selfless I was. I pretty much laughed in their face. I wasn't doing this to be selfless, I was doing it to make a change so I could feel that I had an impact on something. I wasn't sure what to expect when I got down there. When we arrived at our first house, it looked completed. I sort of laughed at the odd jobs we were told to do: paint the shed, paint the stairs, paint the roof; it was lame stuff. I

wanted to build a house. Each day we continued to perfect the small details. This just annoyed me. I didn't fly down here to paint a shed.

At our final work site, I looked inside the house to find it completely bare. It needed new walls, flooring, everything, and here we were painting its shutters. I was beyond frustrated. I asked how long it would take for the inside to be completed and our team leader said he wasn't sure his company was doing it. I looked at him with a stunned look on my face, and he explained to me that his company usually does outsides because that is what brings people back. It hit me; we are fixing small details because that recreates the community. We were doing more than helping out a stranger. We were helping out loads of strangers by making them feel safe again, giving them back something familiar.

Being in New Orleans is more than making a change, being here is rebuilding safety.

I could never describe my week here in words. I just hope others will come down to experience part of what I have.

Shoshana Gibbor

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” (Robert Kennedy)

Recently, I was given the opportunity to participate in a Hillel Alternative Spring Break trip to the Gulf Coast. However, this was not your typical spring break vacation. For the entire week of March 16th through the 23rd, I, along with nearly 230 other Jewish college students from schools throughout the United States, came together in Kiln, Mississippi and volunteered each day in the city of New Orleans. We all had a common goal in mind – to help in the effort to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina devastated the entire area in 2005.

This was my second time volunteering in New Orleans, and although I had high hopes about the work I would be doing, I was still a little unsure about what to expect. I went last winter break with Hillel (January, 2007), and the experience and knowledge that I gained by being a part of the program forever remained unforgettable to me. The things I saw and the

stories I heard opened both my eyes and my mind to the severity of the problems that have been left unresolved in the Gulf Coast since the Hurricane.

After spending that one week doing relief work in New Orleans last winter, I realized that I would never be the same and I knew that I would not be satisfied until I could go back and help out more. There is still so much work to be done for the people of New Orleans, but the spirit and hope that remains alive in the city is all the inspiration I needed to know in my heart that I would find my way back again as soon as I possibly could.

A spark was ignited in me during my time spent volunteering in 2007 and has not gone out since. I came back to New Orleans this past spring break to try and find some closure, some peace of mind, and a way to snuff out that small flame burning within me. I was hoping to find a city almost entirely rebuilt and wished to leave feeling like my work, and the work of volunteers, was almost completely fulfilled. While I was happy to see that the type of work that we were doing this trip was definitely different from the winter of last year, it is far from being finished.

My first experience volunteering in New Orleans was an emotional obstacle for me. I was cleaning out houses that still were padlocked and had not been touched since the storm. I was gutting homes down to the foundations and beams, and had to throw homeowners' possessions to the curb. I felt like I was essentially throwing people's lives and livelihoods away. The work became personal, and I felt like I was invading the intimate privacy of the people whose houses we worked on.

Upon returning to New Orleans I was searching for a sign that all the work I had done and the many volunteers before and after me was making a difference. I did not know that I would leave, after another week of work, with that once small spark in my being now set aflame, filled with nothing short of love for the city of New Orleans.

This time around, I came back with eight other diligent volunteers and a Hillel staff member from Hofstra University and was happy to see that instead of tearing down houses, we were actually rebuilding the Gulf. Painting and caulking, installing hardwood floors and a carpet... it was exactly the type of work I was hoping we would be doing. Only I was not satisfied, and the closure I was looking for turned into a realization that the work here, although different and showing signs of completion, is far from finished.

My trip to New Orleans has strengthened my connection to the city and the community there. I have never felt more strongly about this cause. I once again sat and listened to the stories of the homeowners whose houses we were working on and felt inspired once more by the amazing spirit of those people who lost everything, from their most valued possessions to their animals and family members.

Hurricane Katrina may have come and gone three years ago, but this city is still bruised. It is important to remember that even before the hurricane the Gulf Coast was one of the poorest areas of the country. As of 2003, 20.8% of New Orleans residents lived below the poverty line. New Orleans was the 17th poorest city in America.

Even more shocking than this reality is the fact that the federal government knew that the levees in New Orleans were likely to break under pressure. In 2005, the Army Corps of Engineers requested \$22.5 million to protect residents of New Orleans and the surrounding areas from hurricane-related flooding. Congress provided \$5.5 million.

The Hurricane was a natural disaster that could not be prevented. However, the total destruction that the city faced was by and large due to man-made problems. I felt an obligation, therefore, both as a human being and as an active member of the Jewish community to do whatever was in my power to help fix the ongoing problems in this area. Throughout my Jewish education I was taught about the mitzvah of *Tikkun Olam* – repairing the world through acts of goodness. Hillel’s mission in New Orleans was based on this basic Jewish value. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, from his book [To Heal a Fractured World](#),

“As long as there is hunger, poverty and treatable disease in the world there is work for us to do. As long as nations fight, and men hate, and corruption stalks the corridors of power; as long as there is unemployment and homelessness, depression and despair, our task is not yet done, and we hear, if we listen carefully enough, the voice of God asking us, as he asked the first humans, ‘Where are you?’ (Gen. 3:9) That is the question heard by those who have internalized the ethic of responsibility. Faith is a *form of listening*, and what we hear in the still silence of the soul is God’s question: ‘What have you done with the gift I gave you, of life? How have you used your time? Have you lived for yourself alone, or have you lived also for others? Is your primary question, What can the

world give me? or is it, What can I give to the world? Have you sought blessing or have you *been* a blessing?'

I was able to answer this question, 'Here I am.' – *Hineni*.

New Orleans had a profound impact on me the first time I volunteered, and I have developed a relationship with the community of this amazing city. I have made a vow to keep returning to New Orleans until the city is rebuilt, and after my second experience volunteering, I have a rekindled flame burning in my soul. As a volunteer I feel as though I am able to leave my own imprint on the city and I have personally invested a piece of myself into the rebuilding effort. The work that all volunteers take part in is not only beneficial to those whose homes they are directly working on, but also to the surrounding neighbors, and to the community as a whole.

I have had the opportunity to speak with a number of New Orleans residents throughout the two experiences that I have had helping out in New Orleans. Each person's story was different and unique, and at the same time inspiring and absolutely astounding. I collected only a miniscule number of personal accounts of the events before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina, and each new testimony touched me in such a way that I was left overwhelmed with emotion. Moreover, all the while I was consciously aware that the entire city is filled with such accounts of courage and heroism, but unfortunately not every story has a happy ending. It would be impossible to collect and comprehend all of the different reports from every member of the city affected by the storm. I can confidently say that I have learned a valuable lesson from the people of Louisiana.

The spirit of these men, women, and children, both young and old, is unbreakable. We would all benefit from their charisma and wisdom if only we can learn how to follow their example of how to act after any tragedy, large or small. Step one; come to terms with the loss (whatever it may be). Secondly, clean up. This means doing the tedious job of preserving your foundation, to keep yourself standing, while at the same time disposing of all unneeded things, which may be weighing you down. Lastly, start fresh. Emptiness is not always a bad thing; it is a chance to start anew. As stressful as this process may be it is imperative to remember when rock bottom is hit there is only one way to go, up!

Last winter when I returned home, there were still times when I could not help but think about all the horrible post-Katrina sights I passed and saw. Images of knocked over mall signs and empty amusement parks ironically still ‘flooded’ my mind. Now, after returning from this year’s Alternative Spring Break, I am left with more hopeful positive images and have seen a major improvement in the city. I truly believe that the people of New Orleans and the entire Gulf Coast are heroes for being able to endure something I can only barely comprehend. A little over a year ago, all I saw was ruined wreckage and debris that was once entire neighborhoods. Now I was able to be a part of the rebuilding process of the very same neighborhoods.

The people of New Orleans are as determined as ever to move back, because after all, New Orleans is and will always be their home. In their time of need I was given an opportunity to answer the call, ‘Where are you?’ - ‘I am here’ and I will continue to speak out on behalf of the people of New Orleans, helping in any way I can. I implore you to do the same; it is not impossible. What may seem like a small or meaningless Mitzvah to one person may mean the world to another person. You can be a blessing in another’s life.

As human beings; take part in *Tikkun Olam*. You will be surprised how one act of goodness may benefit you just as much as those to whom you are reaching out! After all, the most complete world for humanity is an incomplete world where we can be a partner in its completion.

Adi Kauf-Stern

Arriving in New Orleans I had no idea what to expect. I knew one other person on the trip with me, and she too was as clueless as I was. Although I was familiar with the story behind the tragedy of Katrina, I was not aware of the current state of New Orleans. Now after spending a week traveling throughout New Orleans, working in different homes and on projects, riding for hours on a bus with students from different schools, living in cabins and meeting the locals, I have a greater sense of what Tikkun Olam means and fulfillment within myself.

I could not be happier about the work I did, whether it was painting, carpeting or listening and sharing the stories of the local residents that I met. I have such a strong connection to this city as well as to the students and staff with whom I shared the experience. To see the

grateful faces of those people whose homes we were rebuilding, as well as the faces of their neighbors, has been one of the most memorable experiences I have ever had.

This trip has also allowed me to continue growing as a person. It has really helped put life into perspective. I have never appreciated my home or family as much as I do now. Throughout the trip, I have taken a lot of time to reflect on what so many people take for granted every day. Spending my spring break in New Orleans has changed my life and I wouldn't change one minute of it for anything. I have always taken pride in the community service I participate in, but I have never done anything like I have in New Orleans.

I will always remember this trip and know that I have changed the lives of people who had once lost hope, and there is no greater gift I could ever give than to help restore that spirit of hope in those who need it most.

Michael Micucci

During my time in New Orleans, it changed my outlook on life and helped me to appreciate what I already had. The people of the city still had hope and aspirations for the future, even though their city was almost completely destroyed in a few hours. People were smiling as volunteers from all over the world and country pitched in to help the fallen city. Even next to a really run-down house was a brand new nicely constructed house. Life was springing up everywhere.

Going with Hofstra to New Orleans was one of the best decisions that I ever made. It opened my eyes to what being an American and a human being really is. It helped open my eyes to how important it was to help rebuild communities and give people hope for the future. Helping these people in need helps everyone, and it feels great.

Touring through the city gave us a chance to appreciate everything that we have, including our lives. It gave perspective to everyone about how homes and food are more important than expensive cars and iPods. It was truly an experience in which I learned more than I ever could being on a beach in Miami or Cancun. It inspired me to continue on. As soon as I return to New York, local volunteering will be a must.

The most important thing I learned here in New Orleans is how to build a community, something I will take with me for the rest of my life, and something I will take seriously when I return back home to New York.

Tara Pokras

As I packed my suitcase for Spring Break 2008, I made sure I was not forgetting my old jeans and T-shirts, work boots, and sleeping bag. An outsider may wonder where are all her bikinis, tanning oil, and booty shorts for Cancun, but I was heading on a different kind of spring break, an alternative spring break with Hofstra University's Hillel to New Orleans. Instead of taking body shots off of cute cabana boys and riding the waves, I would be spending a week rebuilding houses that were damaged after Hurricane Katrina in August '05.

Arriving at the airport in New Orleans made me feel a glimpse of power I would feel throughout the week. All around me stood young individuals like myself spending their spring break rebuilding the coast. It made me feel like maybe my generation would not be as hopeless after all. We arrived at Camp Coastal in Kilm, Mississippi which would be our home for the next week. Sharing a bathroom with 12 other girls in a little makeshift bunk was not exactly ideal, but then I remembered what I came to do, and I could not believe some of the things I accomplished. Getting up on 28-foot ladders to paint the outside of a house, learning how to use a caulking gun, lifting heavy equipment, taking nails out of wood, and ripping down walls are just a few of the things I was able to do.

When I first realized we wouldn't be cleaning out the houses and doing intense deconstruction, I was a little disappointed, but then I realized that if painting is what is needed then I should be more than happy to do it. I should be relieved that the hard work is done, and now it is about rebuilding these houses, and giving the people of New Orleans what they need.

The people of New Orleans have been the most appreciative people I have ever met. Never have I met more grateful people. Everywhere we went all we heard was that if it weren't for the volunteers, New Orleans would not be as far along. Hearing the people's stories kept me going throughout the week. Two elderly ladies that I was able to meet told us stories of escaping the water through boats and helicopters. The bravery and the passion they expressed were so

inspiring to hear. Although they may have lost everything including some family, they still have the motivation to come back to New Orleans and rebuild their lives.

The disaster that hit this town is an unbelievable and catastrophic event that no community should go through alone. America needs to come together and start giving back to a place that still needs so much, even after three years. People think since it has been so long that there is no need. But in reality there is no greater need than now, because as New Orleans slowly begins to recover, it is up to the rest of us to lend a hand.

Hayley Samen

New Orleans looks like a quilt that has been started and even finished in some squares, and other patches completely forgotten, empty. We would be painting and caulking a house for a wonderful elderly woman, and see that almost every house, but a few surrounding it, had been forgotten. Some that were being taken were in the process of being built, while others were finished with a fresh coat of paint on the newly built wood.

The house next to the one we were working on was inhabited by three middle-aged men who came out to say “hi” to us. They were still dealing with FEMA and had to go next door to get clean water. “At least our house is still standing,” Andre said. “Take a tour of the concrete and y’all will see what is left of them homes.”

I soon found this to be the case. On a tour of the lower and upper 9th ward, we saw concrete bases of houses, some with steps still up front, some with trees and gates still there as well. To realize that someone used to live in a home that has now been demolished and taken away, is heartbreaking. Many of these people are still fighting to get their homes and lives back. Many are in trouble from not getting flood insurance and just hurricane insurance, and therefore are not able to come home. We were also told not to be fooled by some of the newly painted houses, because some of them are gutted and painted to make the neighborhood look nicer.

New Orleans is desperate to build houses for those who are stranded there, like the three men I met who have to go and borrow water, and also for those who want to move back but can't. New Orleans needs its businesses back to thrive, which means that it needs its people back to do this. I can't wait to come back during my next break to help do as much as I can for

New Orleans and my country, for all the amazing local people I met, and for those I have still to meet, so that they can come home.

Michelle Suconick

In January of 2007 I decided for no particular reason to spend a week of my winter break rebuilding New Orleans. I suppose I imagined it would be a touching volunteer experience that would also introduce me to the South. Never could I have dreamed just how much the experience would affect me. I walked through houses untouched since Hurricane Katrina, where stuffed animals, couches, and sweaters all became one giant moldy mass, and clothes were crunchy and one with the floor. Shocked is an understatement for how I felt. How could a city have houses like this a year and a half after Hurricane Katrina?

My team and I worked very hard and were able to completely clean and gut three houses over the course of a week. We met homeowners still in good spirits after losing their wedding photos, diaries and even their own children. By the time I came back home to my small town in Connecticut, I could not keep quiet about the horrors I'd seen and the amazing people I'd met. Months after arriving home, I'd think about New Orleans almost daily. I made a promise to myself that I would go back to New Orleans and continue going back until *I* would feel comfortable living there.

And that is why I returned to New Orleans last week. I simply needed closure. I had to know that houses were being restored, that people were able to start living their lives again. I went back to New Orleans not simply to help out and perform tikkun olam, but I was also hoping to achieve some peace of mind.

Needless to say, my second journey to New Orleans was a much more joyous one. On the long bus ride from the airport to our campsite where we would sleep, I stared out my window much like I did a year and a half prior, and reflected. Right away I saw improvements. Where in 2007 it felt as if I was staring at nothing but devastation, in January, 2008 it seemed as if some life hit New Orleans. I noticed the brand new shopping with full parking lots, and the glistening new apartment complexes with blooming flowers hanging from terra cotta pots. These small details made me smile; New Orleans is slowly being rejuvenated.

A key sign to me that improvements were occurring was generated by the workload that was asked of us. We were needed to basically do lots of painting. Whereas on my previous visit,

I had to deconstruct houses before they could be rebuilt, this past time I was *actually* rebuilding. This was definitely a form of closure for me. -While going through people's personal possessions is a much more meaningful and involved form of volunteering, doing something that's physically *rebuilding* someone's home was much more blissful.

As a whole, both experiences were extremely different. A year and a half after the storm we were still gutting houses and ridding them of personal possessions. We had to wear gas masks to avoid inhaling toxic fumes. But two and a half years after the storm we were painting houses and singing with our teammates. To an extent, I feel as though I got more out of my first visit. It was an emotional experience to touch people's possessions and see their photos. But I wouldn't exactly call it a fun trip. This year however made volunteering so much fun. My team and I would joke with each other all day while still managing to achieve more work than was expected of us.

My mother asked me what experience I liked better and I couldn't even answer this question. One experience was difficult, personal and emotional. The other experience was fun and entertaining. Completely different experiences, yet both impressed me as being the very essence of New Orleans: a city which has undergone difficult, emotional challenges, yet still manages to be a fun and entertaining place to visit. I'm not done with New Orleans; I'll be back there dancing to jazz on the street before I even know it.