

Rebuilding Hope

Rockford team among volunteers working on New Orleans cleanup

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By Jim Killam

Everyone in New Orleans here has the same date circled.

June 1. Hurricane season begins.

The levees that couldn't hold back Katrina are almost restored. Almost. But something else got destroyed here last August and it's been far tougher to replace: peace of mind.

Talk to people in the neighborhoods and it's easy to sense the frustration, the feeling that they have been forgotten. In their eyes, government at all levels has failed them. The insurance industry has shorted them. Profiteering contractors have bilked them. But almost universally, they add something else.

Through all of this, the heroes have been the churches.

From across North America, a new flood has washed into New Orleans: thousands of Christians volunteering to do the dirty work of gutting flood-ravaged houses. They're also coming for a purpose they see as more eternal: showing God's love to people who desperately need it.

In late April, 15 people, ages 15 to 77, from Rockford's First Evangelical Free Church spent a week in New Orleans. They worked with Urban Impact, a ministry that long before Katrina was serving at-risk youth and their families in New Orleans' Central City area. Now its two churches – Castle Rock in New Orleans and Trinity in nearby Covington, La. – have become relief agencies, arming teams with tools and work orders and sending them into neighborhoods.

Urban Impact is just one of many ministries and churches helping New Orleans recover. Denominational and doctrinal differences just don't stack up against the need for unity and action.

"A lot of territory issues have been blown away by the hurricane," said Rev. John Gerhardt, Castle Rock pastor and executive director of Urban Impact.

Gutting moldy homes and cleaning up trash is only part of the mission. Scott Lundeen, associate director for Urban Impact, spoke at breakfast the first day to Castle Rock's 35 volunteers from Rockford, Denver and Knoxville, Tenn.

“This is not about rebuilding houses,” he said. “It’s about rebuilding hope.” He encouraged team members to interrupt their demolition work frequently to talk with neighbors, government work crews ... anyone who needed encouragement and love.

Carnage everywhere

The most striking thing about New Orleans is how bad things still are. The city’s poor neighborhoods – most of them – still resemble war zones. Only about one-third of the city’s 600,000 residents have returned. Many never will.

Some areas lie eerily quiet. In the lower Ninth Ward, distant traffic noise echoes down streets lined with wreckage that used to be houses. A broken concrete levee stands less than 100 yards from some of these below-sea-level homes. Standing on the street, you think about the tsunami-like wave that blasted through this neighborhood. It doesn’t take much imagination. The carnage is clearly visible: houses tossed on top of cars; roofs in trees; clothing, furniture and countless other possessions strewn everywhere. The few buildings still standing look like if you touched them, they would collapse.

If you didn’t know better, you’d think Katrina happened a week ago, not eight months ago.

Other New Orleans neighborhoods have started to reawaken. The Rockford team worked in the Central City area, where floodwaters rose more slowly but still wreaked havoc. The city’s skyscrapers and the Superdome are visible about 15 blocks to the east. East of there lies the French Quarter, bustling again with tourists and Bourbon Street revelry. That seems horribly unjust until you remember that the city needs tourism dollars to help rebuild these neighborhoods.

Central City is a surreal combination. Streets have sprung to life again with traffic, repair contractors and, especially, debris-collection trucks. A handful of stores have reopened – most only during the day because of a shortage of both workers and customers. On some blocks, two or three homes are occupied again. Maybe you’ll see a FEMA-provided trailer or two: white, boxy, temporary housing on wheels. PVC water and sewer pipes extend out to the city mains, and short power poles connect to overhead lines.

That scene overlays another: a disaster zone where time stopped on Aug. 29, 2005. Abandoned, muddy cars line every side street; most were stripped of their wheels and had their windows broken out months ago. Moldy water lines are clearly visible on most houses, about four feet above porch floors and eight feet off the ground. And that’s just where the floodwater settled; it was a foot or two higher at its worst point.

Giant debris piles loom in front of the homes being gutted, but every block looks like someone blew up a garbage truck: Paper, plastic, glass, nails, chicken bones, pieces of shingles, insulation ... you name it, it’s under foot. When a breeze kicks up, dust and

black mold spores blow everywhere. People who have returned are complaining of coughs they didn't have before Katrina.

Last fall, rescue workers marked the front of every house with spray paint: the date it was checked, by whom and the number of dead people or pets found inside. In this block of Toledano Street, one woman drowned inside a house, and another in the yard. No one's exactly sure how, because it happened while most of the city was fleeing for its life.

Home again

Frank and Lois Mike have lived in this neighborhood more than 50 years. They're temporarily in a FEMA trailer between their recently gutted house and the house a Rockford team worked on. The people who drowned across the street were good friends. Along with a younger, wheelchair-bound man named Jesse two houses down, Frank and Lois are the only residents back on this block so far. There's plenty of activity, though not always the kind they welcome back.

"It's beginning to get back like it used to be for the last 10 or 15 years," Frank said as an ambulance siren blared down a nearby street. "A lot of crime, a lot of shooting. Last night they had five shootings in the city. It's all amongst the drug addicts. But every now and then when a visitor wanders out of his territory around these projects, they wind up shot or robbed."

Frank, 84, spends a fair chunk of each day sitting on his trailer hitch and eagerly telling stories to the occasional passer by. Better allow some time. This is a guy who, at age 19, was sent to the South Pacific with the 372nd Infantry to help fight World War II. Half his unit died. A half-century later, he survived Katrina: first wading through chin-high water to be rescued by boat from a hotel, then spending five nightmarish days at the Superdome (everything you heard is absolutely true, he says). Finally he and his son were bused to Dallas, while Lois ended up in Beaumont, Texas. For four months, each had no idea where the other was. They finally were reunited in Dallas and came home to New Orleans in early February.

Like everyone else in this city, Frank's jittery about another hurricane season. An Urban Impact team gutted his house more than a month ago, and he and Lois have a contract for renovation. But they're going to wait at least until this winter.

"Nobody's got faith in that levee," Frank said. "Good contractors will tell you, 'You're taking a chance.' But a contractor just out to make a buck, he doesn't care if you lose everything again. He's looking at the money."

There's a tinge of anger in his voice. A lot of people here are angry, he says – with the politicians, with the insurance companies, with those police officers who skipped town when they were needed most. But at least in Frank's case, he never directs his anger upward.

“I’m not angry with God,” he said. “But I’d say it was time to make a change in this city. This city was very corrupt, from the people to the politicians to the police department to the judges.

“I go by what the Bible says. The Lord destroyed the world one time by water. He says next time the world is destroyed, it will be man’s doing. And that’s what happened. If they had fixed that levee right, maybe we’d have had a flood, but not as much. The crooked politicians put something up there to show that the money was spent, but we don’t know how much of it was spent for that.”

Frank never thought of not coming back, though.

“I’ve got this little piece of property. At my age, where am I gonna go to start over?”

Sharing tears

As Frank talked, the debris pile outside the house next door grew as a Rockford team hauled out the rest of the furniture and carpet and started pulling down wallboard. A debris-hauling truck soon approached. These crews are contracted by FEMA and get paid by the amount they truck out. So huge piles don’t last long.

Hauling-crew member Terrence Batiste of New Orleans paused to talk with some of the Rockford volunteers. Soon his eyes welled with tears. “God bless you for what you’re doing,” he said as an end loader scooped up a pile of moldy wallboard and insulation.

Residents cruise the streets, too, picking through debris piles for items they either can use or sell. Wooden doors don’t last long. Neither do air conditioners, which may have salvageable parts.

Doug Larson of Rockford was gutting another house in the Central City neighborhood when he saw a middle-aged woman picking through the debris pile at the curb. “These are perfectly good,” she said, pulling out an ironing board, a plastic drawer box and an oval mirror.

Doug introduced himself – her name was Thelma – and asked if he could carry the items for her. She declined initially but then agreed. “I’m staying just around the corner,” she said.

The walk to her FEMA trailer turned out to be six blocks. As they walked, Thelma told Doug she was the organist at her Baptist church in the Seventh Ward. In the past, she had heard storm warnings but never evacuated because there hadn’t been a direct hit on New Orleans. But when the levees broke during Katrina, she and her family loaded what they could into her car and got out just in time. They lost everything else.

Thelma feels betrayed by the local politicians whom she says misrepresented how safe the city was ... and by how city and state tax dollars have been misspent over the years. Her faith and her love of music have helped her cope with it all, but life is hard.

“I felt so humbled and privileged to have met Thelma and helped her in one tiny way,” Doug would say later, his voice choked with emotion. “We shared a hope in Jesus Christ. No storm could ever take that away.”

When they finally reached Thelma’s FEMA trailer and said goodbye, emotion overcame them both. They embraced and wept together.

And that’s exactly what Urban Impact and ministries like it are doing each day for a city still in shock: embracing its people, weeping with them and extending hope stronger than any levee.

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Sidebars

Gutting a flood-ravaged house

When teams arrive to gut a house, often the only people who have been inside since Katrina are rescue workers and a building inspector. Everything is exactly where the flood left it. The instructions generally are to remove everything from the house and strip the walls down to the studs.

That was the case for one house done by a Rockford team. The owner was still in Texas. Any valuables found by the team – credit cards, insurance papers, sentimental items – were placed in a bag and taken to Castle Rock Church to be given back to the homeowner.

Maybe the most important piece of advice, other than the routine safety guidelines: Never, ever open a refrigerator. Just duct tape it shut and get it to curb. In one Rockford team’s house, it was too late. The fridge had fallen open and the sight and smell were horrifying.

How can I help?

Manpower: Urban Impact is completely booked with high-school-aged volunteers for this summer, but needs adults again this fall, in teams of five or more. Some gutting jobs will remain, but the bigger need will be for volunteers with construction skills. Still, jobs

will exist for anyone, skilled or unskilled, who wants to serve. The focus is on people more than projects.

Donations: The ministry needs cash and supplies, and also Wal-Mart gift cards that it distributes to needy families.

For details about organizing a response team or donating, see www.efca.org/katrina. Or contact Rockford-based Compassion Ministries. Phone 888-592-6776 or e-mail compassion@efca.org.

For information about Urban Impact and Castle Rock Church, see www.urbanimpact.org.

About the author

Jim Killam teaches journalism at Northern Illinois University and is a freelance writer. He was one of 15 people from Rockford's First Evangelical Free Church to make the New Orleans trip April 22-29.

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