

CLARK COLLEGE STUDENTS HELP KATRINA SURVIVORS

Clark College students Ahren Geilenfeldt, Jared Pengra and Erin Wheelon work on the roof of the Dignity House they and other Habitat for Humanity volunteers helped build in Hammond, La. Nineteen Clark students and three local coordinators for Northwest Collegiate Ministries spent 10 days of their recent spring break on Hurricane Katrina recovery work in the Gulf Coast.



Photos by Tyler Boyle

Blown away by hospitality



Clark College student David Dayal attaches siding to the Dignity House residence he and other Habitat for Humanity volunteers worked on last month in Hammond, La.

Did you know?

- Of 1,293 reported deceased victims of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana alone, positive identification has been made on 853. Of those, 53 percent were black, 39 percent were white.
- Of 829 identified victims whose ages were established, 47 percent were 75 and older; 70 percent were 61 and older.
- There are still 966 Louisianians reported missing; out of 11,630 calls to a state-run call center, 9,829 missing persons were identified as alive.

Source: Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals,
www.dhh.louisiana.gov/offices/?ID=192

Volunteers say they got more than they gave on Gulf Coast

By **HOWARD BUCK**
Columbian staff writer

For their recent spring break, 19 Clark College students flocked to warm sunshine, sampling some nifty tourist attractions and fascinating foods.

But this was no carefree vacation: Members of Clark's chapter of Northwest Collegiate Ministries, along with three coordinators, joined Habitat for Humanity crews to help Gulf Coast residents displaced by Hurricane Katrina last summer.

The volunteers got more than they bargained for during their 10-day trip, they said. And they'd counted on plenty.

"I was just amazed by how much hospitality was shown to us," said first-year Clark student Amber Dannals. She and the rest spent a week based in Hammond, La., joining home-rebuilding efforts. Time and again, weary residents materialized to offer meals and deep thanks, she said. Several survivors, bitter over sputtering government relief efforts, cast aside cynicism to open their hearts and share personal stories and good will.

"We were supposed to be helping them," but more often than not, the Clark group was on the receiving end, Dannals said.

"The server always gains more," said schoolmate Stephen Heath, fram-

ing the trip in a Christian sense. "We individuals gained so much more than we were giving as a group."

Besides six days spent raising roofing and walls, mostly at one homesite dubbed Dignity House, the Vancouver contingent toured a wide area, courtesy of their regional Baptist Church hosts. Students slept in camp cabins near Hammond, 50 miles northwest of New Orleans. Home to Southeastern Louisiana University and, until recently, about 20,000 residents, the city suffered high winds that damaged many homes, but not much flooding.

Katrina's impact is pervasive, however. Whether touring flooded districts of New Orleans or traveling through towns still reeling, the Clark students' eyes were opened. Their noses, too.

Television doesn't do justice to emotions that arise at homes where spray-painted numbers signify bodies found, both humans and pets. "It kind of pulls at your heart to see homes with ones, twos and threes on them," Heath said. The stench, not only of mold and rot but also raw sewage and pollution, was equally memorable.

Even where blue tarp isn't omnipresent, everyday services remain sketchy. Stores and restaurants are shuttered or operate sporadically, for want of customers, employees or sup-

Volunteers:

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plies. Conversely, Hammond and other communities swollen by evacuees face a long-term clash of cultures — urban and rural, black and white, old and young, prosperous and poor, the group learned.

Welcome diversions

Clark students visited residents hunkered down in mobile house trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. With funding for key aid programs facing uncertainty, resentment against FEMA and government at all levels remains high, stress clearly etched on faces. "It's been six months (since the storm), but they have to think about it every day," said Stacey Frentress.

But when natives saw the trademark, roof-raising Habi-

tat logo on the group's special T-shirts, with Clark's mascot penguins cleverly inserted in place of human figures, ire quickly transformed to smiles and waves.

The Vancouver visitors were happy to lift children's spirits in a large trailer encampment on a festive Friday evening.

While other volunteers fired up a barbecue and entertained with a live band, the Clark group set up face-painting, crafts activities and a makeshift carnival fishing game, offering modest prizes. "It was amazing to see how those toys they won, so simple and cheap, meant so much to them," Heath recalled.

The Clark contingent did have free time to savor several local treats. Students took in a swamp tour, a wildlife park, a dinner jazz cruise on the Mississippi River and a tour of the French Quarter.

For a real taste of Cajun culture, some even braved heaping bowls of steamed

crawfish that the region revels in, cracking open and sucking juices from the homey shellfish. "Insane" is how Frentress found the meal, laughing.

Additional trips likely

Besides the warm feeling of helping others, the 10-day trip cemented new friendships among the Clark students and left indelible memories.

"It's better than any spring break I could have come up with here," said Philip Ridge-way, his colleagues nodding in agreement.

Cost of the trip was about \$800 per student. But the Clark College student body council agreed to help fund Northwest Christian Ministries' effort, and club money in reserve left students to raise only about \$150 each.

Dannals said her Battle Ground church congregation overwhelmed her with donations that easily surpassed the mark, an example of lingering desire to lend a hand. And already, several students are proposing a second spring break mission in March 2007. It may be only the start of a long-term engagement, given the immense scope of recovery.

"We could go back in the next five-six years, and there'd still be plenty to do," Heath said.

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