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Digging into Disaster Relief

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Digging into disaster relief



Rob Gardner, assistant professor of sociology who is studying grassroots responses to disasters, has traveled to Louisiana three times since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the Gulf Coast in 2005.

In 2005, millions of people watched from afar as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita turned the world upside down for Gulf Coast residents.

Rob Gardner, Linfield College assistant professor of sociology, watched as well, with the eye of a social scientist. Then he traveled to Arabi, La., in January 2006 – the first of three trips – to study grassroots community involvement following natural disasters.

“There was utter devastation,” he said. “Large items had been picked up and dropped randomly across the landscape. You could drive for three hours and still pass homes that were flooded and completely destroyed by the floodwaters and the levee breaches. It was surreal.”

Gardner spent the month living and volunteering in a relief center, the Made with Love Café, sponsored by Emergency Communities, a grassroots group that emerged following the hurricanes. Having conducted prior research on temporary communities at bluegrass music festivals, Gardner discovered an interesting overlap between the Gulf Coast tragedy and temporary festival communities.

“It was the same type of setting I would have experienced in a bluegrass festival,” he said. “People making do with what they had, creating

temporary tent shelters for people to share food, music and community.”

Volunteers came from around the country to help fill the gap left by national agencies.

“People were going without food, shelter, transportation and clothing,” he said. “The smaller relief organizations were able to respond in a more agile way than traditional models.”

Since that first trip, Gardner has returned to Louisiana twice. In March 2006, he worked with Linfield students to “muck and gut” decaying homes. And this year, he and Ed Gans, assistant professor of mass communication, co-led a January Term class there to study community change and the role of mass media during the storm.

Thanks to a Linfield collaborative research grant, Gardner and sociology major Kate Lee '08 spent the summer surveying volunteers online to learn about their motivations and experiences. They found the majority of volunteers traveled more than 1,000 miles and most came from large cities. Many were retirees, students or people in a transitional phase.

“It was an interesting subsection of the population,” said Gardner, who will present initial findings at the American Sociological Association conference in New York City in August. He has also received a grant from the Natural Hazards Research Center at the University of Colorado, funded by the National Science Foundation, which will allow him immediate access to investigate the grassroots response in the event of a future disaster.

For Lee, who took part in both the Linfield alternative spring break and the January Term class, the trips have been life changing. She came away with a love for the area and its people, but more than that, the experience has focused her goals. She is interested in housing issues and hopes to bolster her experiences with an internship next year.

Ironically, the most difficult part of the trips for Lee was returning home.

“Seeing everything how it should be and remembering our work made me wish I could go back and help more,” she said.

— Laura Davis



Thousands of volunteers staffed relief centers such as this Emergency Communities site in Waveland, Miss., after the hurricanes in 2005. Gardner, who spent a month at the Made with Love Café in Arabi, La., during January 2006, returned in January 2007 with a group of Linfield students.