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Hard Work in the Big Easy

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Hard Work in the Big Easy

BY DR. BETH BOQUET, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

Stripping floors and tearing down walls are not skills listed in the job description for a Fairfield University professor. But Dr. Beth Boquet (CAS), a native of southeast Louisiana, was recently part of a Fairfield University contingent of 38 students, four faculty, and two staff members who embarked on an eye-opening seven-day journey to New Orleans, La., an area struggling to recover from Hurricane Katrina. Here is one group's story:



Among the volunteers who tore down and hauled soggy sheetrock to curbsides in New Orleans were Dr. Beth Boquet (English; front left), Dr. Kurt Schlichting (sociology; back left), and a contingent of wonderful Fairfield students.

Tuesday, May 23

We arrive at Camp Algiers, our home base, late on a sweltering afternoon. A no-nonsense freckled redhead named Kay gives us our orientation to "Base Camp." During the past nine months, this facility has housed over 10,000 volunteers from more than 40 relief organizations. We are among the last groups to stay at Camp Algiers – FEMA is closing the facility on June 1 (coincidentally, the first day of the 2006 hurricane season) – so Base Camp has been scaled down to one co-ed tent (which sleeps 500 people) and associated facilities. Armed National Guardsmen check our credentials at each entrance, but the militarism ends there. The base itself has a decidedly social, service-oriented feel. As I shake out my sleeping bag and put the sheets on my cot, my bunkmates on either side, Steve and Sister John, introduce themselves and offer extra blankets ("It gets really cold in here at night"). Someone at the far end of the tent turns off a floodlight and, with a flick-flick-flick, east to west, the room descends into darkness.

Wednesday, May 24

By 6 a.m., the tent is buzzing with activity. I give up on sleep and head to the latrines to wash up. A woman from Albany stands at the sink as I try to wake up. "You demolishing houses?" Albany asks. I nod. "Don't worry, then," Albany assures me. "You'll sleep tonight." I drape my towel around my neck and leave the bathroom, wondering whether a day spent hauling someone's worldly possessions to the curb will be conducive to a good night's rest.

We are led to a house on Pecan Street by our site supervisor, Amy Gisleson. In her trademark pink bandanna and a pair of work boots, Amy earns our respect the moment she single-handedly hauls three ladders to the truck in one trip, and our admiration for her only grows as the week progresses.

Most of the personal items have been removed from the Pecan Street property, but canned goods tumble out of kitchen cabinets whose doors hang off their hinges, and plates are piled near the sink, left seemingly in mid-bite. Watermarks reach five feet up the walls and mold climbs to the ceilings, where holes punched through to the attic offer evidence of rescue workers checking for bodies or survivors. On the kitchen counter rests a mildewed plaque which reads, "Lord, help me to remember that nothing will happen to me today that I can't handle."

The house needs to be stripped down to its frame, so we plow through sheetrock and pry off moldings. By the end of the day, pulling away from a curb piled high with water-logged construction materials, we congratulate each other on a job well done, even as we know more work awaits us on Pecan Street tomorrow.

We skip Base Camp rations this evening in favor of a quintessential New Orleans dining experience at Pascal Manale's in the Garden District. There we dine on a few classic dishes: barbecued shrimp, turtle soup, and gumbo. Driving back, we remark on what looks like a tale of two cities, noticing how little damage the uptown areas have sustained and how badly other areas of the city are still suffering.

Thursday, May 25

Day two on Pecan Street is discouraging. The visible progress made on Wednesday gives way to smaller jobs, such as pulling out every nail in the house, or to unexpected complications, like removing the blown-in insulation that rains down on the heads of our co-leader, Kurt [Schlichting, professor of sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences], Jon [Velotta '07], and Brian [Jones '09] when they take down the ceilings. At one point, Michele [Anzalone '07] wonders aloud, "Is this house really worth saving?" At that moment, I don't have a good answer. But later in the morning, Gisleson does: Homeowners don't qualify for federal rebuilding aid until their houses have been gutted. "What you're really doing," she explains, "is opening up options for people." Operation Helping Hands assists the city's neediest residents, primarily elderly and disabled homeowners, and saves them the \$10,000 to \$20,000 cost of gutting the homes themselves.

As if on cue, a gray Ford Explorer pulls up and an older man steps out, asking for the Catholic Charities contact information. Hammond and his wife Luanne lived at the end of the block for 38 years; they raised all five of their children in that home. Now grown, family members who lived, pre-Katrina, within five blocks of each other are spread out across five states. And this is not an isolated circumstance. Extended families live close together here. Dozens of relatives own homes often within blocks of each other, which means that several generations in the same family lost everything, all across the city. Such substantial losses have made it difficult for families to help each other.

"Thank y'all for doing the Lord's work," Hammond says to me as I dig a Catholic Charities card out of my bag. He

toots the horn at a few of our crew taking a break on the porch and issues a "Y'all be blessed, now" as he and Luanne round the corner. I head back to the house, Michelle's questions and mine answered, for now at least.

Friday, May 26

Work in the kitchen stops abruptly in the early afternoon, and a "Where's the first aid kit?!" holler comes from the front porch. Jon has stepped on a nail. Where can we get it checked out? Medical facilities in New Orleans are seriously compromised, and emergency services are practically non-existent. Gisleson points us to the Operation Blessing Disaster Relief agency, a free clinic located about five miles from our work site, run by volunteer doctors and nurses from across the United States. It is jarring to realize that such services are necessary here, literally across the street from Methodist Memorial Hospital, which less than a year ago was a state-of-the-art facility. Now it is completely shuttered.

People from all over the city have come to this clinic in search of medical care and, during our three-hour wait, we discover, as Sam[antha Christian '06] puts it, that "everybody has a story." Eulette and Carl lost their house in the storm; Tyrone commandeered a neighbor's boat and gathered canned food for stranded relatives. As people share these experiences, others in the room nod in recognition. But the conversation is not all doom and gloom. As tends to happen in New Orleans, attention frequently turns to food, and we leave the clinic not only with an expertly bandaged foot but also with recommendations for the best local sno-ball stand, an explanation of the subtle gustatory differences between "inside" and "outside" shrimp, and directions to the nearest Sonic to taste it for ourselves.

That evening, we decide to test Carl's memory of our drive-up dining options. His directions are perfect; and, as the sun sets, our group satisfies their hunger, their thirst and, perhaps most importantly, their curiosity – at least until Sonic comes to Connecticut.

Carolyn Hern '06 and Jon Velotta '07, barely distinguishable in their hazmat suits, tackled residual mold in the flooded house they helped clean.

Saturday, May 27

We finish the Pecan Street house!

With the final nail pulled and the last shovel of debris dumped at the corner, Carolyn [Hern '06] and Jon don respirators and hazmat suits for the final bleaching to kill any remaining mold.

Gisleson meets us at the house and, with a "Looks great, guys!" she loads the tools in her trailer and tells us to follow her to the next site: a three-family off of Esplanade Avenue in Gentilly. Houses in this new neighborhood are larger, a fact noted with despair by a few members in the back of the van. The slightly improved economic conditions also mean, however, that the neighborhood is less deserted, which is encouraging. Work is going on in several houses on this street, carried out by homeowners, relatives, hired contractors and, of course, volunteers.

The owner of our house, however, has not made much progress since the storm. In fact, we find more personal effects in this house than in the last one. We couldn't pick our homeowner out of a crowd, but we could tell you what type of bath gel she prefers and who writes her favorite romance novels. A calendar tacked to the kitchen wall still shows August 2005. I try to flip through the next several months, but the pages have been fused together by the floodwaters, as though nothing has really come to pass since August 2005 after all.

Work proceeds quickly. Walls come down more easily; insulation is practically non-existent. This place does, however, present its own set of challenges: a sleeper sofa wedged in a small hallway, oozing Katrina waste at every turn; wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of damp, mildewed clothes and moldy children's toys hauled out of dark, dank closets; and roaches the size of frogs that, most disconcertingly, fly.



That evening, we head out to hear some traditional jazz at Preservation Hall, one of the oldest clubs in the city. No food, no drinks. Just music. "When the Saints Go Marchin' In" takes on a decidedly poignant tone at this time in this place, as the front man calls out to the audience, who responds with a rousing refrain.

Sunday, May 28

Our Sunday morning church service is filled with allegories of floodwaters rising and receding, of loss and redemption, of faith and salvation. On our way to the house, Brian offers his own allegory, remarking on the lifeless trees lining what used to be leafy boulevards. While some of the hardier oaks survived, thousands of trees in the city were unable to weather the saltwater intrusion in which they stood for weeks.

We stay late today, working straight through the most torrid hours. Now we understand why construction starts so early in the morning. Heat buckles up from every surface, and the guys, drenched from head to toe, look like they've taken a dip in a primordial pool.

That evening, as the laundry machines spin the day's filth from our work clothes, we gather to reflect on our time together so far. Almost everyone expresses shock at how little has actually been done in the past nine months. "It looks in some parts of the city like the hurricane just happened yesterday," Jon says. Katie [O'Brien '06] adds, "And two days after we leave, hurricane season starts all over again." Sam and Brian admit that it is sad to feel like we are finishing off the destruction of someone's home, even though we know this part is necessary for the re-building to begin.

Monday, May 29

Our last day of work in New Orleans. By early afternoon, the end is in sight. Trash collectors have not made it into the neighborhood this week, so the contents of the home are, quite literally, stretched out all the way down the block.

Inside, Amy gives us her farewell speech. Shifting from one foot to the other – she doesn't look like she's accustomed to standing in one place for long – she thanks us for the work that we've done. Beyond that, she thanks us for having brought life and energy to a city desperately seeking renewal: "It's so nice to hear people talking about, you know, normal things. About something other than the hurricane." ■

Dr. Beth Bouquet, professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences, is also director of the University's Writing Center.