

## What Then Must We Do?

Nancy Richard, Delgado Community College

- The article describes two service learning projects that
- engaged our Delgado Community College students in a
- sense of community that transcended their personal trials.
- A regional accrediting agency afforded local conference
- registrants the opportunity to participate in a Habitat
- for Humanity construction project; more than a hundred
- volunteered. What had been a diaspora of historical
- proportions effected a new community spirit, one borne of
- mutual loss and committed to restoration and rebuilding.

**W**hen the levees broke and the floodwaters came, the force pushed houses off their foundations, swept cars and boats into the trees, trapped people and their pets in their attics and on their rooftops. More than a thousand died. In news stories covered across the country, reporters shuddered at the Biblical proportions of what we had been warned could happen and refused to believe actually would. On August 29, 2005, we were reminded, in ways we are still trying to fathom, that Nature is capricious, that the day we've been given is the only one we may plan with any modicum of certainty. Past that, we are running on pure faith. So then, what do we do now, in the face of so much loss, so much uncertainty?

When my husband and I evacuated on Saturday, August 27, we took with us our dog, the three cats, and the usual assorted clothing for the usual three-day evacuation. We headed for our second home, the one where we will soon retire, some 300 miles to the northwest. What

followed would be anything but the usual. We watched the weather reports on Sunday, helpless as the massive storm roared toward the city. On Monday we sat in front of the television for hours, stunned, unable *not* to watch. We could get no specific news about our home in the suburbs. We imagined the house flooded, our 70-year-old oak tree dissecting it right through the den. When my sister called, panicked, her first question was, "Did you get Mama's wedding ring?" I had retrieved it in the rush to pack, but as I told my sister, I don't know why I did. We were evacuating again, for the third time in as many years. Why wouldn't we expect to return in three days with hardly a sign of rain awaiting us? We were prohibited from returning for weeks, but when we did, we found we'd been among the fortunate. Our house was intact, though the old oak was damaged beyond saving. We had electricity and within another month, phone service.

My friends and colleagues, however, were not so lucky. David and Sally and Paul and Yadi and Tom and Iva and Wendy and Betty and Craig and Cindy and Gayle . . . well, I've long since lost count of those who lost everything: their homes, the contents unrecognizable in a dark sludge, a refrigerator on its side, jammed against the front door, water lines to eight, ten, twelve feet. When I saw them for the first time, they were living with friends, relatives, in motels, out of their cars, and ultimately in FEMA trailers. But they returned, to a crippled city, to a college whose future was uncertain.

What I watched in my colleagues and in my students throughout the following spring and summer semesters was a daily reminder of what writers have long observed about the human spirit. In the face of what seem to be insurmountable obstacles, untold loss, they come to work, to school, exhausted and discouraged, but with persistent good cheer. They stop and chat in our classrooms and hallways to share stories, some of them comic, some heartbreaking. But they're here. So that, after all, is what we have learned to do. It is what *Times-Picayune* writer Chris Rose asked of the May 2006 Ursuline Academy graduates:

"You must never forget what happened here. You must take that experience with you into the world" (D-5). The work that is central to this issue of *Reflections* is testament to how we have done just that. We have told our stories. We have taken what has happened to us into the world: with both humor and sadness, with resilience, with wisdom. And we have done it with language.

Readers familiar with Peter Weir's film *The Year of Living Dangerously* will recognize the character Billy Kwan's allusion to Tolstoy's lament, "What then shall we do?" As Jakarta disintegrates into chaos, the photographer recalls also Luke, Chapter 3: 10-11: *He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.* To the reporter who "can't afford to get involved," Billy Kwan admonishes, "You do whatever you can about the misery that's in front of you. You add your light to the sum of light." Surely displaced, traumatized, grieving citizens of Louisiana found comfort in the sum of light afforded by the kindness of others. Untold numbers of families and civic and religious groups took us in, fed and clothed us, helped get our children into school, offered us employment. Others, like the Virginia Tech students, came here during their Thanksgiving holiday to stand knee-deep in muck that had obliterated the ordinary possessions of ordinary families. They tore at walls of moldy sheetrock, where the water lines reached above their heads.

Still others worked with Habitat for Humanity to build Musicians' Village, where local horticulture students provided the landscaping. Writers like Chris Rose, author of *I dead in attic*, began to try to shape language into questions for which the answers were inadequate or nonexistent. And when schools re-opened, when classrooms began filling, many in temporary quarters, teachers let their students write, helped them to shape the language available to them into stories that contained, confined the greatest and saddest mystery they would ever face. Chris Rose's own six-year-old daughter, asked by her first grade

teacher to write about her experience, had this to say, "There was a hurricane. Some people died. Some of them were kids" (D-5).

Of the poetry that emerged, one fine example is then University of New Orleans student Angelle Scott's "Mourning Station." (see page 16). Scott's opening allusion to Roethke's line immerses us in the universal truths of such visceral descents. What we face is the abyss that stares back, the unfathomable. The darkness of the abyss was the darkness of a post-Katrina city and region: weeks, months—and now more than two years for some neighborhoods—without electricity, the rank odors of death and mold, the starkness of a landscape of dead trees, neighborhoods bereft of all life: no dogs, no cats, no birdsong.

The grief was by no means limited to the immediate region. From two hundred miles away, in Lake Charles, Louisiana, Stella Nesanovich sat and watched television coverage of what had befallen her hometown, her childhood home in Gentilly. For this poet, helplessness and grief find substance in language in her "Streets of New Orleans," in the shaping of what cannot otherwise be comprehended. Writers and those of us who are fortunate enough to write *and* to teach have long understood the real mystery of the process: our work in moving words around on the page is less an effort to be understood than to understand. Apart from whatever cathartic relief the act of writing affords, the process leads us to something new and unexpected, something learned. The discovery is too often an unpleasant one, but we write, anyway. We stumble in the dark, grope along cave walls (as a writer friend muses), until we bump into the thing we didn't know was there. The works we have gathered here represent a myriad of responses to extraordinary events. But they are consistent in one significant way: all of these attempts to understand lead the writers to moments of revelation about themselves and their relationship to the rest of humanity, moments in which they acknowledge their personal stake in the city's—the entire area's—recovery. Every neighborhood is rife with stories of abandoned houses, the absence of those who never

returned, having nothing left to retrieve. For those who have chosen to remain here, the city will become what they can make of it.

When Habitat for Humanity responded to the city's immediate need for affordable housing, a number of community partners joined with them. One striking example of such partnerships is Musicians' Village in New Orleans's upper ninth ward. Integral to the cultural life of this great city, displaced musicians were able to return, thanks to this initiative, which originated with Branford Marsalis and Harry Connick, Jr. One photo of a completed row of homes features a volunteer from Delgado Community College's Horticulture Program and reveals hopeful, life-affirming paint colors: parrot green, sunset orange, and plum. The program's director, Bettie Abbate, and her students partnered in a service learning project to provide landscaping for Musicians' Village. Additional photos reveal the work in progress and a volunteer and new homeowner enjoying the landscaped yard. The following are excerpts of reflections submitted by Abbate's students, responses to the



project on two levels, as a horticultural learning experience and as an opportunity to participate in the renewal of hope for those less fortunate:

I do feel that this particular service-learning project was beneficial to us. Overall, it was a very enriching experience. The most rewarding feeling was seeing how appreciative the homeowners were. It felt so good participating in such a worthy cause. Likewise, the way our team worked so well together was a boost to my sense of harmony. I felt the 'community spirit' of our department back again, for the first time since Miss Katrina came to town. -DA

*Looking back at the project for Habitat for Humanity, there is a lot that I got out of it. Starting with what this was really about, helping others that lost a lot of everything. With the installation of a small landscape project, it helps a home owner beautify their yard and also the N.O. area. Finally, it was self-gratifying to help others out during this rebuilding process. And I am looking forward to more projects to help out our community and N.O. -JR*

*Working with the homeowner, Freddie Omar, was great. He wanted to know everything about the plants we chose for his house. After his morning class, he came back to his home and was ready to work. We actually let him plant the bedding plants. He was shown how to take them out of the pots, open up the roots, dig the hole and put them in the ground. He got his hands dirty, asked questions about the bedding plants he was putting down and how long they would last. We explained summer and winter bedding plants to him, watering, and why we chose the base plants we put in the beds. I was impressed that he was willing to learn and participate.*

*I was very pleased with the Habitat project because it provided many opportunities for me to work with multiple houses and designs. After working on my assigned house, I worked alongside my colleagues who*

*chose different designs and other plants. It was interesting to talk to them, ask questions about their specific plants and learn why they chose them. Some plants I was not familiar with so it was a new learning experience, while at the same time I was able to educate others on the plants that I knew about. Overall, I give the project an A+ for an excellent learning experience and opportunity to help in the rebuilding of New Orleans. -KT*

What began as a hands-on, practicum level experience for Abbate's students became an experience in community engagement. In the beautifying of their fellow citizens' new neighborhood, they have gained, in one student's words, a "sense of harmony" and "community spirit."

The etymologies of "neighbor" and "neighborhood" are explicit about proximity. Before our catastrophic brush with natural disaster, few of the volunteers in local service learning projects would have considered themselves neighbors of those they sought to help. In post-Katrina New Orleans, however, our world suddenly became smaller. The larger political arenas of state and federal government mattered less than those around us, those who had suffered and lost, yet against all



reason, chose to return, to stay, to rebuild, to become part of the larger neighborhood that was the entire metropolitan region. As valuable as were the efforts of volunteers who crossed the country to gut *our* homes, once they returned to *their* homes, we were left with each other.

The horticulture student's recognition of the recovery of a "community spirit" is a cogent reminder of the value of service learning projects. Derived from the Latin *communitas*, which signifies a coming together as equals for a common purpose, the term community has special meaning for us now. A Cajun writer from the suburbs helps to build a home for a family she will never meet. A Cleveland transplant leads her English students through a project with long-term implications for the saving of our state's wetlands, once a formidable barrier between massive storms and our homes, our towns, our historic architecture. A college administrator, having lost her own home, its contents, and a car, volunteers at Musicians' Village and builds steps to a front porch. Here a once homeless musician will sit on pleasant evenings and greet his nearest neighbors, courtesy of the larger community of neighbors. The impact of such work reaches far beyond the transitory self-gratification a volunteer takes home with aching joints and a sore thumb. Along with the physical shelters of Musicians' Village, volunteers have also constructed new ways of thinking about community, about being our brothers' keepers, about the real spirit of solidarity, of *communitas*.

Bettie Abbate's own reflection about her students' service learning project adds another layer to our understanding of its significance:

*In fall 2006, the HORT 113 (Environmental Landscape Improvement I) class partnered with Habitat for Humanity, Baptist Crossroads, and others to landscape homes built in the Musicians' Village in the upper ninth ward of New Orleans. In this first semester following the catastrophic Hurricane Katrina, twenty-five students enrolled and used their knowledge from this class to design and plant landscapes in front of thirteen houses.*



The original plan for this project was to landscape the first five homes that had been completed by the beginning of the semester. The homeowners were living in those first five homes, and some were available for the students to interview in order to make plant selections based on their preferences for specific plant materials and colors. The class was very excited about this project after visiting the site and talking to the homeowners. The upper ninth ward was among those areas most devastated by Katrina. The opportunity to begin re-greening this landscape while learning through a hands-on project resulted in a wonderful learning experience for the class and for me as well.

Many challenges arise when projects take a class off campus, and this one was no exception. The class had to take initial measurements and analyze the site for the design. The challenge was that the homeowners were not available at the time of the class meeting. To accommodate them, some of the class members went on the weekend when the homeowners were available to meet. The additional time needed outside of class was necessary to begin the design phase of the project and was, in retrospect, a meaningful way for the students to begin to connect with each homeowner. This connection in the relationship between the client and the landscape professional helps to realize the vision of the finished project through the eyes of both stakeholders. Additional challenges included transporting materials to the site, a broken water main in front of the houses that flooded the area prior to planting, plant material selected for the design that was unavailable at the time of purchase, and guiding students and Habitat volunteers from other parts of the country into a cohesive work crew.

The problem solving required to meet these considerable challenges resulted in the most valuable lessons for my students. As an instructor I look for and engage my students in those "teachable moments" that crop up occasionally during planned lessons. I have learned that through service learning, "teachable moments" are built into each

*project because the student is thrown into the real workplace. Those lessons include resourcefulness, giving supervision, getting along with others, cooperating, planning, delegating, and managing a project. These are all important life skills that make each of us successful on a daily basis, regardless of our occupation or vocation.*

*In addition to the skills and knowledge the students received through the service learning project, I would say that most of my students and I were enriched in ways that the sterile environment of the classroom cannot match. The ability to touch another human being from whom we might otherwise be far removed is indeed a precious gift that most of us would not readily seek out. To give one's talent, ability, or knowledge to that experience is to truly share oneself with another. That is what defines service learning. It is through that exchange that we become beacons of light and hope for changing a corner of our world. I can't think of a more worthy corner to change than our own beloved city that waits patiently to be restored.*

This instructor's "beacons of light" are reminiscent of Billy Kwan's "sum of light." Abbate's students, engaged in the real spirit of *communitas*, have done what they could to relieve the misery before them, to restore a neighborhood so recently robbed of all hope. The symbolic acts of their profession are as meaningful as the flowerbeds, mulch, and shrubs they've left behind. In their visceral connection with the earth, in the restoring of life to an area stripped barren by floodwaters, these horticulture students have reminded us of our connection to each other. If we have paid attention, this is the lesson we are privileged to learn: everything good that comes of our region's rebuilding will come from the work of our own hands.

Just two weeks before Christmas, I had the privilege to work on a Habitat for Humanity project myself, this one across the river on the West Bank. I worked with a crew of academics, led by a young AmeriCorps volunteer who would soon begin her studies at Tulane Medical School. I installed hurricane straps and Tyvek wrap, carried

ladders, and swept up rusty nails. I hammered for hours, for a time in the rain, an activity that lends itself to much thinking. I recalled my English 102 student, who in the first semester following the hurricane, was living in her home's second floor rooms while she and her partner gutted and began the restoration of the flood-ravaged first floor. A year later Joey would email me from California, where they'd returned, saddened and frustrated by the lack of progress here, by the inefficiency and bureaucratic roadblocks.

In that class and others were students who shared FEMA trailers with too many family members, where *if* a computer existed, it was impossible to get work done. Others commuted from Baton Rouge, a trip that under normal—had we ever known normal?—conditions would have taken hardly more than an hour. But they were commuting along with thousands of others, so an exhausting three-hour commute to school or work and back again at the end of the day became just another post-Katrina story. Yet when they wrote, they said they'd learned something important about themselves. The loss of their belongings, their homes, had been grim, but then they all knew of others who'd lost family members, a grandfather found dead weeks later in the attic, a cousin whose remains were discovered beneath the rubble of a neighbor's garage. They knew there were bodies still in the morgue, unidentified, unclaimed. They were grateful to have survived, to have their families nearby, to have returned to work and to school. And I thought, too, of a single symbol of hope, captured by my colleague, poet David Cook in "Delgado Pond: Early Spring" on page 201 of this issue.

As I'd been hammering away at hurricane straps, my mind wandered from my students, the classroom, and our battered campus to the two-by-fours, plywood, and sawdust around me. I would never know the future owner of the home I worked in, but I'd become connected, secured my mark with each blow of the hammer. I recalled the words of Ernest J. Gaines, his reminder that our responsibility to the larger

community is an obligation that necessarily begins with knowledge: He who knows only his own house knows little of the community. He who knows only his street knows very little of the town. He who knows only his town knows very little of the state. And he who knows only his religion knows very little about man or God. (15)

As we cleaned up the Habitat site at the end of the day, when children were returning home from school, I heard a trumpet from a house on the next street, its roof sagging and still covered with a now tattered blue FEMA tarp. A child practicing. Long tones. Improving the embrochure, pitch, breathing, control. A young musician sitting in a poor neighborhood, engaged in the creation of the universal language that connects us one to another. I could still hear that child as I boarded the bus and we pulled away. It was raining, but a child was practicing. The irises still bloom and someone is still teaching music.

## Works Cited

- Gaines, Ernest J. "The Autobiography of Mister Ernest Gaines." Cultural Vistas Spring 1990: 4+.
- Rose, Chris. "Children of the Storm, It's Time to Represent: A Post-K Call to Action for Graduates." *The Times-Picayune* 14 May 2006: D-1+.
- The Year of Living Dangerously*. Dir. Peter Weir. Perf. Mel Gibson and Linda Hunt. MGM, 1982.