

A Winter Break to Fix What Katrina Broke

A red Ford pickup drives down a dirt path, carrying a coffin and seven UCSB students. It is the early afternoon in Phoenix, La. – a small rural area in the vicinity of Plaquemines Parish. Phoenix resident Tyrone Edwards and Suncere Ali Shakur – a worker from the organization Common Ground Relief – both get out of the truck. The coffin has been salvaged after Hurricane Katrina tore it from its prior location, a cemetery behind a chapel a half-mile away. The students, including myself, moved the coffin, and when Shakur takes our picture, we don't know how to react.

“Stop smiling,” Shakur says after snapping a shot. “You're all smiling too much.”

It is now mid-December, and we're halfway into the Hurricane Katrina relief trip. Students from UCSB have gutted storm-damaged houses, bleached toxic mold and witnessed firsthand the devastation and rehabilitation of crippled New Orleans. The trip, initially proposed to A.S. Legislative Council by Associated Students Student Government Adviser Aaron Jones, received thousands of dollars in donations from both university and community sponsors, including Montecito residents, academic departments and UCSB faculty members. Aside from a \$25 deposit and the cost of a few nights of fast food, the trip was free of charge to the students who participated.

The Common Ground Community

At the Common Ground community center, a UCSB volunteer serves chicken strips and fruit salad, with tentative plans for pancakes in the morning. This is the 9th Ward of New Orleans, a low-income area hit hard by the hurricane. Not too far away, in the Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans' levees burst, causing some of the greatest devastation in America in the last hundred years.

Common Ground's current headquarters are sparse – a hollowed-out church lacking walls, heat and hot water. Across the street, Common Ground operates a women's center, a legal collective and a distribution center that hands out free food and supplies to affected residents.

Many of the volunteers for Common Ground will stay in the community center tonight. They come from all around the country, many of them college students. UCSB had one of the highest turnouts of all the universities involved, lending a total of 46 volunteers to the relief effort. Organizer Tuyen Nguyen contacted Common Ground through the nonprofit Resource Action Group after working with it and the Vietnamese Student Association in Louisiana in October 2005.

Approximately half of the UCSB group stayed at and worked in the 9th Ward, while the other half worked primarily in rural areas, based out of Harvey, La.

Shakur, a distribution coordinator for Common Ground who is originally from Washington, D.C., directed the UCSB workers in Harvey. He said the organization receives funds from groups such as Veterans for Peace, Islamic Relief and the Teamsters Union, and that it intends to maintain a permanent presence in Katrina recovery efforts.

“In the short term, we're trying to push Common Ground for the next five years,” Shakur said.

A Structural Disaster

Outside of the Common Ground community, UCSB students get a first-hand glimpse of stark environmental realities. On Christmas Eve, Edwards takes a few of us on a tour of New Orleans. The most frightening and dystopian stop on the tour is the Lower 9th Ward. We've seen this type of grim devastation in other areas: in Phoenix, just a 30-minute drive and a ferry ride away, one volunteer pointed out a house still intact, yet sitting 10 feet to the right of its foundation.

However, nothing can prepare us for destruction of this magnitude. Part ghost town and part hellish ground zero, the Lower 9th Ward was closed to public viewing a few weeks prior to our visit. Houses lie scattered like leaves after a strong wind, some coming to rest on top of cars, some on top of other homes. Boats and barges that once floated on the Mississippi River now sit high and dry on the tops of hills and in the front yards of roofless homes, sometimes several city blocks from the banks of the river.

We notice a massive pile of stones and gravel, serving as a makeshift replacement for a missing chunk of the levee. Walking out onto the top of the gravel pile, volunteer Dennis Ingle and I observe a panoramic view of the river and the Lower 9th Ward side by side. Dennis points out a strange geographical feature – the river level appears to be higher in altitude than the land itself.

A Social Disaster

City administrators in New Orleans unveiled an \$18 billion plan for rehabilitation last Wednesday, with projects including a light rail network, a revamped school system and an increased investment in recreation areas. A controversial section of the plan proposes a four-month building moratorium affecting the city's most damaged neighborhoods, as well as a new government entity that could use eminent domain to seize non-rehabilitated areas.

Edwards, a resident of Louisiana and a human communities development specialist, described the obstacles to reconstruction and rehabilitation in New Orleans. He said he believes excessive regulations discourage residents from returning to their homes and rebuilding their lives.

"The city has to work with folks," Edwards said. "You have to get a permit for nearly everything that you do."

Keeping the Community

Darwin Bondgraham, a UCSB sociology graduate student and volunteer, said he feels the social situation in post-Katrina Louisiana shadowed deeper social tensions. Currently studying race and geography, Bondgraham said he thinks charity work should not supersede socioeconomic improvement.

"In terms of inequality in America, or poverty in America, that involves a lot more than just charity or relief work," Bondgraham said.

But for many of us, relief work is a gut-level response to a disaster such as Katrina. While clearing debris in Phoenix, we find children's toys and old jazz records in the mud, as well as family videotapes and heirlooms. One student finds a virtually intact Polaroid picture of a young couple amidst the rubble. She passes the photograph to Edwards, who plans to send it back to the family to which it belongs.

Jeronimo Saldana, a UCSB comparative literature and Chicano studies major, said students played a valuable part in restoring the damaged area's solidarity. Saldana said he feels the activity offered normally uninvolved students the chance to work together for the common good.

"The same organizations and the same 10 people are always vocal and active," Saldana said. "I think all of us cared ... There was a sense of adventure, a sense of passion and humility, a sense of urgency."

Organizers like Tuyen Nguyen and Vi Nguyen are currently developing the Katrina Relief group into a full-scale organization, and are planning a trip back to New Orleans during spring break. Tuyen also said she would like to bring Common Ground coordinator Shakur to speak at UCSB in the spring.

"People are so happy with us just being able to be there," Nguyen said. "These folks have a lot of hope and courage and spirit."

The Long Drive Home

As we drive back to California, we stop at a Love's Gas Station in New Mexico. It is in the early hours of the morning, and the vast stretch of Highway 10 now lies behind us. While our caravan of Astrofans refuels, I talk with Bondgraham, trying to piece together our reflections from the trip. Although dismayed by federal response to the disaster, he still remains hopeful about grass-roots relief activities. Ultimately, Bondgraham says, these charity efforts are part of a larger picture, an effort to strengthen and vitalize a needy, disadvantaged community.

"If you come down and gut a house, knowing that you're building up a person, and by association their community, wealth and self-determination, then you get it," Bondgraham says.

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