

Thanks for Coming

BY SUSAN JACKSON DOWD

We heard her voice before we saw her car. “Thanks for coming,” the driver yelled at us, beaming and waving. We looked up, raising weary arms and hands to wave back. Seemingly out of place, we occupied a lovely veranda on St. Charles Avenue in Uptown New Orleans in our sweaty, dirty work clothes. Our anonymous cheerleader assured us that we were in exactly the right place.

Our PW group spent a week in New Orleans. We worked with Habitat for Humanity for three days and spent the other two days absorbing the culture and the current situation of the city. Tours provided a visual overview of Hurricane Katrina’s destruction and the progress. Speakers and hosts explained the realities of living through the storm, and the realities of recovery. Our presence was and is a critical part of that recovery.

For some of us, this was a second trip. PW national leaders and staff, coworkers and friends participated in a work trip to New Orleans in August 2006 (see *Horizons*, November/December 2006). St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian coordinates and hosts volunteer work groups who come to assist families in New Orleans through the RHINO (Rebuilding Hope in New Orleans) program. For the cost of their travel and minimal room and board, each volunteer working with the RHINO program has the opportunity to participate in hands-on clean-up assistance, new home construction and a clothes/household item pantry. For information about RHINO, visit www.scapce.org.

Why Rebuild New Orleans?

Kathy Randall, PW national leader and New Orleans resident would say because we have to. “The people, the very different culture and the port offer so much to the world,” she told the May participants. The city of New Orleans is defined by its very particular culture—and that means its people. Jesus calls us to serve God’s people.



Leading by example—May PW trip participant Joyce Smyre, Cleveland, N.C., wears her commitment to Gulf Coast recovery efforts while working with Habitat for Humanity in New Orleans’ Upper Ninth Ward.

So, Presbyterian Women at the national level is committed to the people of New Orleans. “I came to New Orleans last year asking ‘why rebuild?’ and left saying ‘we must rebuild.’ I came back again in May 2007 just to make sure and to see the difference made so far,” reflected Judia Foreman, Synod of the Sun representative to the Churchwide Coordinating Team and two-time participant.

The Churchwide Coordinating Team is organizing and encouraging other work trips and is raising awareness. “A lot of people think everything is okay in New Orleans” commented Lisa Houston, PC(USA) employee and May participant. “They see images of the Superdome and of the French Quarter that make it look like the city is back. But it’s not back. We have to let people know.”

Jean Marie Peacock, vice-moderator of the 216th General Assembly, told the

group that volunteers are making rebuilding and coming home a reality for many New Orleans residents who do not otherwise have needed resources. Peacock serves as the Presbytery of South Louisiana’s associate presbyter, dedicated to congregational development and disaster recovery. She is managing Project Homecoming, a joint effort of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and the presbytery. Project Homecoming works with congregations and communities as they recover and rebuild. Individuals and groups can get involved as volunteers or through partnerships, contributions to the building materials fund, and more. For more information, visit www.pslrecovery.org.

Hope for the Future

But there is no sense rebuilding and coming home if the city is not a safe place in which to live and build a future, Ruthie Frierson told the group. Frierson, a member of St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian and founder of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, launched the grassroots movement that has successfully lobbied for Greater New Orleans levee board consolidation and reform, as well as legislation in the Louisiana legislature to consolidate the Tax Assessors’ offices in New Orleans from seven into one. For more information, visit www.citizensfor1greaterneworleans.com.

Thanks for coming—our group heard these words again and again from Habitat homeowners, speakers and hosts, and people on the street. Volunteers are rebuilding hope in New Orleans—and there is so much yet to be done. “So, the story of New Orleans and its potential continues. You are a part of that potential,” Randall told the group. We are all part of that potential.

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