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Volunteering after Katrina changed their lives forever

Helping restore and rebuild after 2005 hurricane was transformational event

by Christopher Quinn

For almost a year, Jonathan Kidwell waited to volunteer in New Orleans.

He had watched TV reports as Hurricane Katrina pummeled the city during his first days on the job as a graduate assistant at Ohio State University in 2005. He had landed a scholarship in a prestigious two-year master's program in sports management.

Images of the disaster dogged him, but Kidwell stuck with his work and his classes for nine months. His opportunity arrived with summer break.

The relief trip to New Orleans transformed his life and led him to Atlanta, where he works for the Atlanta Community Tool Bank, a nonprofit that helps restore homes for the poor.

"There was no parting of the clouds and booming voice of God," Kidwell, 26, said recently. "It was just the reaction that I had to that experience and how it affected me."

Others have responded in much the same way. Katrina has been a transformational event for many Americans.

An estimated 2 million volunteers have worked on Katrina relief, the majority from churches, temples and mosques, the FEMA Gulf Coast Recovery Office estimates. They have spent time, money and sweat rebuilding the Gulf Coast.

Not everyone has changed career plans. But for many, the experience has reshaped their lives in ways both large and small, said Courtney Cowart, co-director of New Orleans Episcopal Diocese Office of Disaster Response.

Many come with expectations of working and then leaving fulfilled. Instead, some depart with a feeling of unease. “There is a sense that something is missing in what had been their life up to that point,” said Cowart, an Atlanta native.

She recounts some of those stories in her book about ministering in New Orleans and in New York after 9/11, “An American Awakening: From Ground Zero to Katrina, The People We Are Free to Be.”

Some volunteers undergo a shift in perspective. Many have come from a world of plenty and met people who have lost everything. And some have realized that helping others fulfills them in a way other work does not.

“And they take those things and say, ‘Now, what do I do?’ ” Cowart said.

Across the country, volunteers are returning home and getting involved. They join a Habitat for Humanity project, work at a food pantry or volunteer for other types of service.

After New Orleans, Kidwell redirected his life. He had landed his graduate position with a combination of smarts, hard work and connections. He won an internship at American University after earning a bachelor’s degree. Then he worked with Holy Cross College, helping organize and run a regional NCAA basketball tournament before his acceptance at Ohio State. He was building a blue-chip resume.

His parents had supported Jonathan’s aspirations and helped inspire his values growing up.

Robert Kidwell had taken his son on church-sponsored trips to Appalachia to refurbish substandard homes. They supported Jonathan as their Methodist church sent him on a short-term mission trip to South Africa, which helped him become a leader among the church’s young people.

And his parents listened when Jonathan called from Ohio State and told them of his desire to help in New Orleans.

Near the end of his school year in 2006, his mother, Duane Kidwell, sent Jonathan a newspaper article about an Episcopal church relief program that accepted volunteers from all over the country. “One month later, he went down,” she said.

One week after that, a war inside Jonathan erupted. The first alarm sounded when he spotted what he thought were “disaster tourists” snapping pictures near a house he was working on. He was outraged. He had met suffering people like those he had seen on TV and seen the difference his work could make in their lives. He was angry that tourists would demean them by gawking.

He later learned the people were locals taking pictures as their family home was being demolished, but he realized he was already strongly identifying with the victims.

Within days, Jonathan told his parents he wanted to drop out of Ohio State, leave his scholarship behind and work full time in the relief efforts.

His reaction was common among college students, said Katie Mears, a crew chief for more than a year for volunteers including Jonathan. “They come down, and every day you work is the hardest you’ve ever worked,” she said.

Mears said seeing the tangible results of helping someone in dire need had an emotional impact on students. “The idea of going back to college and studying Descartes seems a little ridiculous to them. I spent a lot of my time trying to keep them in school.”

The third day of Jonathan’s weeklong trip, he was talking to a veteran volunteer from Alabama. If you leave and feel guilty for not having done enough, come back and help some more, the man told him. If you leave again and still feel guilty, maybe it is your calling to come back and stay.

Jonathan was already feeling dissatisfied with the “professionalization” of college sports, preferring the purity of true amateur athletics. Also, he had been wondering how he could juggle a career in sports while continuing to help others in his spare time.

Suddenly, in New Orleans, he was helping full time. And Mears said the local Episcopal Diocese was always looking for crew chiefs. Jonathan began to consider new options.

Near the end of the week, he spent a hot day cleaning out an older woman’s house, dumping by the curb rotten debris. Then he shoveled out sand the receding waters had deposited on the floor. At the end of the day, he walked up to tell her goodbye. She choked up and could barely say the words, “Thank you.”

“It was the most genuine thank you I had ever received,” Jonathan recalled. “I knew I had to come back. The experience was so powerful for me. And it was at that time in my life that maybe I was looking for something inside of myself that I didn’t even know was in there.”

That’s when he made the phone call to his parents. “He was so emotionally involved in it,” his father recalled.

They were both proud of their son and wary of his leaving behind an investment of time and money in his career. They convinced Jonathan to finish his degree, then make the decision.

“The next week at OSU, I was in a fog,” he said. “I had trouble getting motivated to going back to what I was doing.”

Jonathan received his degree in June 2007 and headed to New Orleans for 10 months. Earlier this year, he moved to Grant Park and began work at the nonprofit, which provides volunteers, tools and materials to repair homes for those who can't afford them or can't do the work.

"This is my passion. This is my purpose," he said. "Forty years down the road, when I return, I hope I can look back and know that I made a difference for a lot of people."

'SOMETHING MEANINGFUL'

New Orleans — Yasmin Bowers could have left.

There didn't seem to be much opportunity for the Atlanta student at Tulane University after Hurricane Katrina.

She finished her master's degree in public health 18 months after the disaster and paused to look around. The local economy was wrecked. Jobs were scarce.

"I had it in my mind that I was going to graduate and leave," she said recently, sitting in a New Orleans coffee shop. "I was going back to Atlanta where all my friends and most of my family live."

But her mother and roommate, Andrea Floyd, pushed her to stay.

Floyd argued that there was a void in the city the two could fill. Floyd got them internships with the Office of Emergency Preparedness. People came to them with questions, asked them to make presentations that would help the survivors, respected and appreciated them. They began to feel like they belonged.

Bowers and Floyd went on to start a nonprofit, Consciously Rebuilding. It puts on workshops about healthy living while under stress, provides health screenings and helps rebuild homes to healthier and more energy-efficient standards. Bowers is paid no salary. She earns money as a substitute teacher.

"I'm not in it for the money. But society is not set up for me to live free," she said. "I felt like I had the opportunity to do something meaningful. So I stayed."

COUPLE ANSWER A HIGHER CALL

Vancleave, Miss. — Three hundred.

That's the number of Mississippi families who have new or restored homes because Jack and Dee Boreing, formerly of Douglasville, left theirs behind.

The Boreings had worked in Mexico and an orphanage in Haiti on short-term mission trips with their church. They dreamed of selling the family farm and their custom-

embroidering business to pursue it full time. They waited for an opening, a sign from God, they said.

Weeks after Katrina mauled the Gulf Coast, the executive director of United Methodist Volunteers in Mission in Decatur called Dee. She told her husband about the call later that day.

Dee: "God called today."

Jack: "He did?"

Dee: "Yeah. He said he wants us to go to Pascagoula."

Sitting at her desk in Mississippi recently, Dee recalled the moment: "I didn't even know where Pascagoula was."

It's on the Mississippi coast. In short order, they Boreings sold their farm and their business and went there.

Today, the Boreings coordinate volunteers from across the U.S. who are still arriving to rebuild homes.

They had hoped for an opportunity to serve in Mexico. They are as surprised as their family that they are in Mississippi.

"Blessed are the flexible, for you shall not be broken," Jack Boreing said.

EFFECTS CONTINUE TO UNFOLD

Atlanta — Darren Silver, 35, spent four days in June swinging a paintbrush and pulling nails in New Orleans.

The effects of seeing the devastation, physical and emotional, are subtle and still unfolding for him.

"I think it has given me a different perspective on the struggles people are going through," Silver said. "To some extent, I'm more sympathetic and understanding. And I'm taking time to think about other people in the world."

Silver had volunteered with helping agencies in the past, but his life had become busy. He was thinking of getting involved again when an invitation came. The Atlanta Service Corps of the Jewish Funds for Justice and the Marcus Foundation asked Silver and other young adults to attend a meeting about kick-starting community involvement. They decided working in New Orleans would be an inspirational way to get things rolling, so he and about 20 others flew down and met

some of the people they would be helping, listened to their stories and then got to work.

Since the trip, the Atlanta volunteers have met several times to talk about working together on community projects.

“And for years in the past, I would participate in Meals on Wheels. I haven’t done that for a few years. But I will do it this year,” he said.

http://www.ajc.com/living/content/metro/stories/2009/01/04/katrina_volunteers_atlanta.html