



Hope And Dignity

Three-and-a-half years later, New Orleans still recovering.

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Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans more than three-and-a-half years ago. I kept having to remind myself of that fact over and over again during our recent trip to the Crescent City with a group from Congregation B'nai Torah. Three-and-a-half years have gone by. And yet, here I was standing in a shell of a building with uneven floor boards and exposed studs helping a dreamer lay down roots in what remains a devastated area of New Orleans. It was a pitiful, heartrending sight and yet it was full of hope and stubborn dignity. I had to admire what Nat Turner was doing.

This was a scene that played out over and over again during the four-day trip, which was sponsored by the Jewish Funds for Justice and brought 17 young adults from Atlanta to New Orleans. My husband Nick and I were excited when we heard about the trip earlier this year. Both of us were glued to our television during Hurricane Katrina and felt as though helping was beyond our reach - until now. With the Jewish Funds for Justice trip, we were given an opportunity to help. It was only after we arrived in New Orleans that we realized how much the people there desperately need help.

Flooded Synagogue

There were many spiritual, emotional and inspirational moments throughout our four-day weekend. Seeing the destruction of Congregation Beth Israel's building first-hand echoed, for many of us, the synagogues of Eastern Europe that were destroyed during World War II. You may recall seeing images in the news of people carrying Sifrei Torah through chest-high water. The shul's members attempted to salvage their 3,000 sidurim and six Torahs, but after weeks of being submerged in flood waters, the damage was beyond repair. The congregation has since relocated to another suburb and is slowly rebuilding. However - and perhaps this would serve as an appropriate symbol of the city - the original synagogue still stands empty and abandoned with a "for sale" sign out front. Piles of broken glass and fallen street signs remain scattered outside. At one point this was the bustling hub of a community, but now all that remains are water level lines on the walls and dusty footprints.

Building A School

Another sight which brought me to tears was at the Blair Grocery School, a two-story house turned neighborhood grocery which is being transformed into a self-sustaining home-school by former New York City teacher Nat Turner in the Lower Ninth Ward. I wandered upstairs to find exposed studs, uneven floor boards - really just a shell of a house littered with tools. Sunlight poured through four windows lighting what would otherwise be a scary room. Underneath one window was a large table with four computers placed in a round. It occurs to me at this moment that this is where Turner's students have class. In this shell of a house, surrounded by newly created gardens, a handful of mold-infested houses and a nearly empty neighborhood that once bustled with multiple generations, this room stands for the future - the future of the students' lives and the future of the neighborhood. It brought me to tears that this poor environment was their shining light. They deserve so much more and yet it seems to be a place of great hope. And for Turner, this room is just the beginning of the dream he has for the school. It was so inspiring to see that one person's decision to take action to help the kids of the Lower Ninth is becoming reality with the help of volunteers from all over the country.

Building Homes

The other projects we worked on were with St. Bernard Project. Zack Rosenberg and Liz McCartney, the founders of the nonprofit group, explained that the goal of the organization was to rebuild homes for senior citizens, people with disabilities and families with children who cannot afford to have their homes rebuilt. The organization enables residents to move back home by minimizing the cost of renovating each house to a mere \$12,000, all of which they tell us can be paid for by donations and grants if the homeowner needs this type of help. Otherwise, help comes in the form of free labor. We had the privilege of meeting some survivors of the storm whose struggles and fortitude were inspirational. Jules Kain told us that he escaped during the evacuation and upon his return he was informed that his shrimp-fishing boat had been washed up during the storm into a neighborhood and was resting between two homes. It had to be removed immediately. Without the means to have it removed (he said it would cost about \$150,000), the state confiscated it. In one moment, Kain lost his only means of income and his home. His fortitude to move on with his life while taking care of his girlfriend who suffered a stroke is inspirational. Kain found the St. Bernard Project and applied for help. We were so grateful to hear his story and to help Kain start over again in a beautifully renovated home.

Shape The Future

Despite the storm occurring three-and-a-half years ago, lives are not back to normal. Most residents of the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish have not returned home. Many of the places we visited look more like a Third World country than any American city.

One thing that was repeated by all the survivors and volunteer organizers we met was: Please, go home and tell everyone you know what is really happening here. There is still so much to do and it will only happen if volunteers like you give your time and donate to help us.

In some small way, we hope that our words will inspire you to look further into what's really happening in New Orleans. Check out the organizations listed on this page to see how you can help. You'd be surprised how much a small gift, even your time, can affect someone in need. The survivors of New Orleans thank you.

<http://www.jtonline.us/main.asp?SectionID=23&SubSectionID=58&ArticleID=6452>