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The Remains of the Hurricanes

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As I stepped out of the car all I could see was right in front of me: a house that desperately needed work, another house off in the distance with water damage and no windows, and a two-year-old Federal Emergency Medical Agency (FEMA) trailer. Buildings had FEMA numbers scrawled on them.

In January my synagogue, Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan with the Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ), sponsored a trip for 24 teens to help rebuild Louisiana. When I heard about this opportunity I was thrilled at the chance to help the Gulf directly and I couldn't wait to apply.



After my acceptance and a few organizational meetings off we flew to Louisiana. We were fortunate to have two rabbis, Rabbi Felicia Sol and Rabbi Jill Jacobs, with us and other leaders who were well versed in Jewish study. This is an example of Jewish teens helping others not of our faith and we were happy to be able to do so.

I didn't think people were living in FEMA trailers anymore, I thought people were getting back to their normal lives. But as soon as the plane landed my view changed completely. Driving and seeing the ruined fields and houses that desperately needed work told me that the job wasn't done. I saw a house that had one side torn off with barbed wire coming out. To think that 18 months later, people's houses aren't fixed, they don't have jobs, scared me.

We arrived in New Iberia, La., ready to work. With assistance from the Southern Mutual Help Association, we would be scraping and priming a house with students from a nearby Catholic school. Seeing the rustic house with no furniture inside made me realize how lucky I am. We scraped and primed all day and at first we couldn't see the improvement.

When it began to rain we all sat in a shack and shared something about our community. Hearing their stories about the destruction from the two hurricanes and seeing the ruined

areas around us gave us a new sense of what we had accomplished. Though the house wasn't finished yet, we were starting on our path to making the world a better place. Just looking at the work done by a group of teens made me feel that anyone can do anything if they just put their mind to it.

We celebrated Shabbat with the local community. We attended services Friday night at Congregation Gates of Prayer, a Reform congregation in New Iberia, followed by dinner with the congregants. It was a small congregation with only 33 families, nothing like our synagogue in New York City with 1,700 members.

They were so grateful to have us at their services and loved hearing about our synagogue's success. We sang Oseh Shalom for the New Iberia Jewish community (using a tune written by one of our Hebrew school teachers) which they also enjoyed because unlike our synagogue they read all their prayers as opposed to singing.

On Sunday we went back to the house and continued our work. We climbed tall ladders to prime the outside. I got the chance to speak with the owner of the house, known as Pops.

Pops' stories of the destruction affected me in such a way that I wanted to do more than we were already doing. He told me that he and his son owned homes on the same property. One of the homes had been uprooted from its foundation and blown so far back that it hit the shed in the backyard.

Every damaged home in Louisiana was assigned a FEMA number for record keeping. As we were scraping the exterior of Pops' house we scraped away the FEMA number, which hit me hard. Eighteen months after the storm FEMA still had not helped Pops or his neighbors to rebuild their homes. It took a group of eighth and ninth graders from New York to help Pops' house become livable again.

After Sunday's work we toured the town of Henry and saw the destruction done by Hurricane Rita. Seeing these farmers and their families' lives ruined made me think about my own friends and family and it made me want to help more.

As we walked through the abandoned Henry Elementary School many emotions were running through our minds, tears streamed down our faces. I thought about how awful it is that these kids don't have a school anymore. The windows were broken outside of the school and in the internal hallway. There were books, dust, and other school materials everywhere.

On some of the doors I could see a line higher than my head indicating how high the water had risen. It was amazing to me that this town, eight miles from the Gulf of Mexico, had taken in nine feet of water in some areas. To see the chairs strewn about and the cafeteria ruined made me realize how lucky I am to go to a good school and be able to play sports.

I have now experienced tikkun olam, our Jewish obligation to repair the world. This was an opportunity for me to get my hands dirty (and my shirt and pants too) and really help those less fortunate than me. It opened my eyes to another part of the country. I took many pictures of our activities over the long weekend and will not soon forget what I saw and learned.

Since the trip our group has met several times to discuss what we can do now. A few members of the group spoke at Shabbat morning services to educate our community about the devastation in Louisiana. We ran a booth at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun's Purim carnival to raise money for the rebuilding effort in Louisiana.

Until you see the destruction for yourself, you can't really comprehend the situation. Our goal is to use words and pictures to make more people aware of the dire situation.

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