

# Poverty In Our Backyard

Ann Arbor

**A**fter driving two hours southeast from New Orleans, our tour bus came to a complete stop in the middle of the barren countryside. Rev. Theodore Turner pointed to an empty patch of grass, in the middle of which stood a small brick pillar.

Before we could understand what we were looking at, Rev. Turner said: "That's what is left of my house." As the bus continued on its way, he continued to point out the remnants of driveways scattered approximately every 20 to 30 feet in otherwise desolate landscape.

"Any driveway you see is where a house once stood," he told us as he elaborately described individual houses that once comprised a full neighborhood in Boothville, La.

This was not the first time I had seen such devastation. Last February, I was fortunate to be a participant on the University of Michigan Hillel's Alternative Spring Break trip to Uruguay. There, I worked with a group of 21 students to build emergency homes for those that had been affected by the economic collapse in the region.

Although I will never forget the harsh sights I witnessed in this foreign country, I have even more trouble describing how I felt in Boothville, when I realized that

such extreme economic devastation exists in my own country as well. The greatest country in the world, the United States of America, assists nations abroad while neglecting glaring examples of poverty within its own borders.

I was fortunate to grow up in a Jewish family. Though my family emphasized the importance of *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* (repair of the world), I had never directly experienced the kind of poverty that I saw in the Gulf Coast. In college, in addition to traveling to Uruguay, I became more interested in social action as a student government representative and a member of the Michigan community scholars program.

However, it took two full years after Hurricane Katrina hit for me to go to the Gulf region and serve my fellow citizens in need. This fall, I was lucky to be one of 17 U-M students to make the trek to New Orleans in an attempt to contribute to rebuilding the hurricane-devastated area. The service-learning trip was a collaborative effort between U-M Hillel and Jewish Funds for Justice.

As our group stood atop the levees, we came to understand that this infamous

category III storm was not an isolated occurrence. The community of Boothville, located at ground zero, has been affected by storms too many times before. Even



Shelley  
Rosenberg  
Community  
View

worse, the area was poverty stricken well before Katrina gained it public attention. If anything, Katrina simply made the severe economic situation manifest.

I asked many members of the community why they chose to return, with full awareness that even after their houses are rebuilt they could again be destroyed overnight. The answer I received could not be contested: "This is my home." Unfortunately, two years after Hurricane Katrina, over 50 per-

cent of Boothville's inhabitants

still cannot return home. Despite such hardship, every community member we met remained optimistic about the possibility of rebuilding. Rev. Turner has rebuilt his church to better serve his community.

He continues to rebuild his neighborhood, house by house, while his own home remains in ruins. He is truly incredible; his passion for life and helping those in need is moving.

Leaving the region was difficult as there is still so much work to be done. Yet we left

inspired by the power of ordinary individuals' efforts to help their fellow man.

I returned to campus with a new sense of awareness of my responsibility as an American and as a Jew.

I am now working to inform other Michigan students of current issues such as the congressional bill calling for stronger levees, which is unlikely to be passed as of yet because it is attached to a war bill.

My experience in New Orleans has also opened my eyes to my responsibilities as a citizen here in Michigan, where many inner-city neighborhoods are as devastated as those that fell victim to Hurricane Katrina.

I am a weekly volunteer for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Washtenaw County as a mentor for a high-risk child in a local elementary school.

This spring, I intend to return to New Orleans as a participant in U-M Hillel's first ever interfaith Alternative Spring Break trip comprised equally of Jewish and Muslim students.

Furthermore, when I vote next fall, I will undoubtedly consider my firsthand knowledge of the poverty in this country. As a Jew, I must continue to help those in need throughout my life. □

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