

Senior Katherine Scott, right, in pink, and sophomore Amy Bachman, left, in green, pack groceries for dispossessed parish residents at the food bank of the Community Center of St. Bernard, where the student group spent most of its time while in New Orleans.



PHOTOS BY KEN BENNETT

Student Volunteers

Going with the flow

Seventeen student volunteers assimilate some simple truths about service while assisting and assessing the situation in New Orleans.



Sophomore Greg Banks carries garden waste he had generated to a dumpster at the New Orleans Botanical Garden in City Park.

ALMOST THREE YEARS after flooding fomented by Hurricane Katrina filled the bowl of New Orleans to the brim, a deluge of a different kind continues to cover the Crescent City. Volunteers by the carload come from all corners of the country to contribute to its recovery, keeping it smothered in sweat and empathy.

The tide surges in March, when college students on spring break descend on the city. A group of seventeen Wake Forest students was among the influx this spring. During their seven-day visit March 8–15, the students went with the flow and met the need, no matter how humble or make-work their assignments might have seemed. They were inspired by the people they met and the conditions

they observed, and student life organizers tentatively are making plans for a return trip next year.

Alternative spring breaks, which offer students opportunities for experiences of a more positive and purposeful nature than what is customarily associated with the term “spring break,” have been gaining popularity in recent years on campuses across the nation. Most entail service in impoverished or otherwise disadvantaged areas here and abroad. Besides New Orleans, groups sponsored by the Wake Forest Student Life Office this spring served at an animal shelter on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, and tutored low-income high school students in Stevens, Arkansas, as they prepped for their college entrance tests. Faith-based campus organizations, meanwhile, dispatched

AGAINST the **WIND**

Junior Elisabeth Collins, left, and freshman Christina Federowicz pull weeds in a bed at the Botanical Garden. The popular attraction is slowly recovering after being decimated by flooding.



DURING DINNER, A WOMAN WE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW just came up and gave us a heartfelt thank you for being here and helping to rebuild. It's just been amazing to see how much we're appreciated here, and I hope we can keep making a difference after we get home. —Andrea Davis, junior



Junior Evan Raleigh takes a break from his service work to play with Joshua Johnston at a flood-ravaged house in St. Bernard Parish.

an additional eight groups totaling more than a hundred participants on service trips to Trinidad, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Pearlring, Mississippi, Houma, Louisiana, New York City, and Panama City Beach, Florida.

With student interest in civic engagement and volunteering on the upswing generally, participation can be competitive. More than forty students applied for the New Orleans slots, which were restricted by the housing that would be available in the city. Participants were chosen through an interview process to determine their motives, the extent of their civic and campus involvements, and their vocational reflections and aspirations.

Relief Spark, a New Orleans-based volunteer clearinghouse organization that provided its housing and assigned and oversaw its work, split the group its first morning on the job, assigning half the students to a community

center in devastated St. Bernard Parish and the other half to City Park, one of America's largest urban parks which had been covered by brackish water. The park group was assigned to pull weeds and dead plants at the popular Botanical Garden so that new flora could be planted and admission charged to generate revenue for other park restoration projects.

"My small hometown [Vestal, New York] had been flooded, and I saw how it had been impacted," said freshman Christina Federowicz during a respite from the soil. "I have friends who had lived here and I was inspired by what I had seen and heard about New Orleans' struggle and I wanted to come and help." Her companions had other, differing volunteer backgrounds and motivations for joining the trip. Sophomore Teddy Aronson of Essex Fells, New York, thought New Orleans had been "removed from our national list of



Sophomore Greg Banks pries nails from studs in the gutted home of Sandy Pelas in St. Bernard Parish.

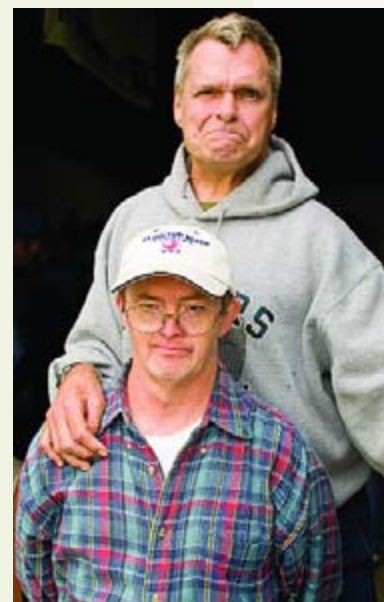
this city back to pre-Katrina standards. Even though [flood victim] Sandy's house was destroyed by 10 feet of water, she [c]ould recount with a smile [the story of the] 12-foot alligator [that had entered her house]. Stories like these reflect the positive attitude and... the awesome culture that is alive and well in New Orleans. —Elisabeth Collins, junior

priorities" and needed help. "Weeding might not be the most important job," he said, "but it needs doing." Junior Elisabeth Collins of Ellicott City, Maryland, who has volunteered extensively with special needs and refugee populations, said service is a great way of meeting people. Junior Katie White of Wellesley, Massachusetts, said the trip offered an "opportunity to get outside my bubble." Senior Katherine Scott of Wallingford, Connecticut, whose prior volunteer experience included service at a Russian orphanage, said she "knew what a terrific experience it was to get outside myself," adding: "You don't always get to choose what you want to do, so you do whatever is needed." And junior Matt Triplett of Wilkesboro, North Carolina, said that Wake Forest's motto of *Pro Humanitate* "spoke to me" as he applied to colleges. Now, he added, "As much as Wake has given to me, I want to give back."

Later, the park group reunited with its other half at the Community Center of St. Bernard, a garish-blue concrete-block structure on a side street pockmarked with treacherous potholes in flood-ravaged St. Bernard Parish just downriver from the Lower Ninth Ward. The center, which is sponsored by a coalition of more than thirty nonprofit organizations, provides, at no cost to the parish's eroded population, clothing, non-perishable food products, telephone service, Internet access, various counseling services, and, perhaps most importantly, a welcoming place to gather with others in similar circumstances. The students spent most of their stay there, sorting clothing, stocking food shelves, cooking the daily noon meal, and spending time with the dispossessed and sometimes desperate people who came and went.

One of those was Sandy Pelas, a stout woman with a story that was a

I THINK THE MAIN MESSAGE that residents ... wanted us to bring back with us is that New Orleans and its people are alive and kickin'. Their houses may have been destroyed but their spirits are [high], and they [are driven] to get



Flood victims Jimmy (top) and Edward pose for a photo at the Community Center of St. Bernard.

AGAINST the **WIND**

A solitary FEMA trailer stands in an empty field in the Lower Ninth Ward that once was partitioned into blocks that contained scores of houses. The Industrial Canal floodwall whose breach wiped out the dwellings can be seen in the background.

litany of misfortune. Flooded from her former home, packed into a FEMA trailer with her fiancé and six others, and sickened by the fumes she was convinced it was emitting, she bought and began to renovate another flood-damaged dwelling with the funds she received from the state's Road Home rebuilding program. But then a fraudulent contractor who did a bit of electrical work at the house bilked her of much of her cash before stealing most of the rest. Unable to pay for labor, she

had come to the center looking for college students who would install sheetrock. "This wasn't my plan," she said. "I wanted to pay for it." The students agreed to help and followed her through the barren landscape to her house in a mostly abandoned subdivision, only to find that the structure was far from ready for drywall. The best they could do that day was pull nails from studs, but they all agreed that their time had not been wasted. "Eight people in a FEMA trailer, with one of

ST. BERNARD PARISH IS THE ONLY U.S. COUNTY [ever to have been completely] under water. [At the Community Center,] Stephen, a local resident, [told us his personal story]. His loss included his home, his possessions, and his wife. He has dedicated his

life to rebuilding his community. He told us that he felt like the volunteers were the true heroes of the storm. This [inspired] our group to become more motivated to serve our own local community. —Devin Cowens, junior



Rebecca Currence ('61) tells the students about her organization, Women of the Storm, at the Community Center of St. Bernard. Becky spent the better part of a day with the students at their service sites at City Park and the Community Center. Later in the week, she and her husband, Dick ('61), treated the students to dinner at a favorite eatery.



PEOPLE IN ST. BERNARD PARISH, THE LOWER NINTH WARD, AND LAKEVIEW are just [now] moving home or are living in trailers in front of their houses waiting for them to be fixed-up. Some, but not many, businesses are reopening in these areas, and when you drive

through these neighborhoods, it looks like the storm hit just a few weeks ago. That's probably the scariest part: it's been so long, yet there is still so much to be done. However, it was made clear to us that as long as groups like us continue to come down and help rebuild the city, it will start to return to the way it was within a few years. —Katie Gomez, junior

them [confined to] a wheelchair...this is putting a face on a catastrophe," said sophomore Jermyyn Davis of Atlanta, cradling the child of a friend of Sandy's who had accompanied her to the center.

"The trip was a trying experience for all of us, I think," said trip leader sophomore Devin Cowens after their return. "The damage seemed worse than we expected, partly because of the time that has passed since the hurricane. I think some of us thought that more would have been accomplished. And there were many aspects of our schedule that were out of our control and required on-the-spot adjustments.

"But then we talked about how we could bring our experience back to

Wake Forest and become delegates on behalf of New Orleans," she continued. "And we can look back and see how we had stayed positive, flexible, and cohesive as a group. It was definitely a positive experience, and we are definitely thinking about returning next year."

To read more comments from the students, read their blog at www.wfu.edu/magazine.

