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Building homes, and bonds, in New Orleans

TCNJ group lends elbow grease to Katrina relief effort

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Special To The Times - EWING

For a group of college students, winter break this year meant more than relaxing and enjoying time off from classes.

Nearly 40 students from The College of New Jersey spent last week in New Orleans, aiding in the recovery from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The students journeyed to the Louisiana city as part of [TCNJ's Bonner](#) Community Scholars program. Five staff members also were part of the team, which worked with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to reconstruct houses.

The students, who were scheduled to return over the weekend, chronicled their experiences on the Internet, writing about the power of hearing firsthand from victims of the August 2005 flooding, the warm welcome they received and their impressions of government relief efforts.

The students and staff members are scheduled to be greeted with applause on campus today. CM+RTMonday, Jan. A reception where they will recount their experiences will be held in their honor at the student [center](#) starting at noon, while the athletic department will recognize them during halftime of the Lions men's basketball game with Brooklyn College. Tipoff is 2 p.m. in Packer Hall.

One of the goals of the trip was to give students the opportunity to experience life outside their comfort zone and to analyze the situation from an economic, social and governmental standpoint, Heather Camp, associate director of the [Bonner Center](#) for Civic and Community Engagement and a resident of Princeton, said in an interview before the group left New Jersey.

She said the [Bonner Center](#) hosts a trip every year and this is its second trip to New Orleans. The last trip was in May when about 17 students helped gut houses.

Camp said such trips also allow students to bond with each other.

"We have a really diverse group of students that are going down there," she said. "There will be a wide range of perspectives."

Tariq Shabazz, a sophomore at [TCNJ](#) and a resident of Trenton, was hoping to broaden his knowledge about Katrina and its effects.

"I'm up here living in New Jersey and everything is fortunate for me," he said. "I'm looking to get a personal perspective of how Katrina has altered lives."

It was Shabazz's first trip to New Orleans.

"I want to meet people personally who have gone through that experience," he said. "My help is not much but I'm down here doing something positive."

Morgan Reil, a senior at [TCNJ](#) and a resident of Hamilton, went on the [center's](#) first trip to New Orleans and was looking forward to seeing the changes this time around.

Reil said last time the effort was mostly concentrated in gutting houses, whereas this time it was directed at building houses. She said with twice as many people going she was hoping to achieve double the amount of work.

"If something had happened to New Jersey I would hope that the rest of the United States would pull together to help us, too," she said.

Camp said she would like the [Bonner](#) program to commit to going to New Orleans until significant progress has been made and the city is back to where it was prior to Katrina, or better.

"In addition to helping the students to become motivated about an issue that is larger than themselves, (we hope) they will have an experience that touches their hearts and their minds and motivates them," she said.

The [Bonner](#) Scholars plan to continue their volunteer efforts closer to home. Beginning today ~~CM+RT~~Monday, Jan, 21, they are accepting donations for schools and nonprofit groups in the Trenton area. They are seeking winter coats, hygiene products, children's books, school supplies, canned goods and small tools.

For more information, call (609) 771-2548. To read the students' Katrina blog, go to <http://tcnjbonners.wordpress.com>.

URL: Building homes, and bonds, in New Orleans