



The Times

Students use their break to help others

Group helps to rebuild homes in New Orleans

Monday, January 26, 2009

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Special to the Times

EWING -- While most college students spent their winter break resting and relaxing, a group from The College of New Jersey participated in its version of "Extreme Makeover."

Twenty-one students and four staff members of the Bonner Community Scholars traveled to New Orleans to help rebuild homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

"It's depressing to see how much hasn't been done," said freshman Naomi McMullen, a Trenton resident. "You would expect that almost four years later things would be greatly improved."

The students, who were in New Orleans Jan. 10-18, are Bonner Community Scholars, TCNJ's "domestic Peace Corps." Each year, the college recruits and selects a diverse group of incoming students to participate in the four-year program.

The scholarship program, which helps cover tuition, attracts students interested in community service or social work. Students spend a minimum of 300 hours working alongside community partners to improve the quality of life in Trenton and the surrounding area. The program is affiliated with a national network spearheaded by the Bonner Foundation in Princeton.

On this trip, the students worked with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance at their volunteer camp in New Orleans. Ten other Bonner Scholars stayed in Pearlington, Miss., along with other Bonners from Middlesex County College. In addition to rebuilding homes for hurricane victims, students were also responsible for planning and cooking meals for the volunteers and maintaining the camp's facilities.

McMullen was joined by freshman Katherine Avila as they rebuilt a roof for a woman in the Lower 9th Ward.

"It's a big house," said Avila, a graduate of Trenton High School. "There is another team working on the same place doing the rooms and the closets."

Both girls said they were learning more than home improvement skills on this trip. They said that talking to the people they were helping gave them a better perspective about the hurricane and how it affected people. Avila noted that she learned a lot from the woman whose home they helped rebuild.

"She's really grateful," said Avila, who is an international studies student. "She told us about how she was evacuated and went to Texas. When she came back, she cried in every room she went in and saw how her house was destroyed."

McMullen, also an international studies student, added that the experience, which included removing shingles from the roof, was invaluable.

"That was the best part, meeting the homeowner and hearing her story. I am hoping to go back," she said. "I am more appreciative of where I live and what I take for granted at home. It was definitely an eye-opener."

The students were escorted by Morgan Reil, a recent graduate of TCNJ and a fellow Bonner Scholar. Reil, an alumna of Notre Dame High School, has made five trips to New Orleans as a student and now as an

employee. She says there has been progress in the 9th Ward, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

"I definitely do see an improvement every year I come back," said Reil, who first visited New Orleans in 2006.

What she saw was heartbreaking. Houses were ripped from their foundations, doors were broken and the smell of mold was nauseating. When she returned to New Orleans in June, she heard signs of hope: Birds were chirping.

"Before that, it was silent," she said. She noted that, through the efforts of hardworking volunteers like Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, it is slowly getting better, as some owners have returned to their homes.

To illustrate her point, Reil recounted a story about a woman named Juanita. Reil worked on her house last summer and immediately visited her the first day the students arrived.

"We took a group of 40 people on a walking tour, and all of the students were on her front lawn," she said. "She invited everyone in, and it was really awesome to see because the last time we were there, they were starting the drywall. Now it is finished and beautiful. She showed us where she had her Christmas tree and told us stories about Thanksgiving."

Reil, whose family owns Visitation Home in Yardville, was working on another house framing windows, priming and painting. She said she is proud of the work the Bonners have done.

"It's nice to hear what some of the freshmen say, and some of the upperclassmen were blown away," she said. "It's one thing to hear about it on the news, but not until you see it do you realize, 'OK, this is real.'"

She also added that community service is something that she hopes to continue throughout her life.

"I love people," she said. "You don't do community service to feel good about yourself but to give something back. But you do get something back, especially down here. When people say thank you, it just means so much after you see all the devastation. That's my heart."

To see a blog about the Bonner Center students' 2008 experiences in New Orleans, go online to tcnjbbonners.wordpress.com.

For more information on the Bonner Center, go online to tcnj.edu/bonner.

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