

Reflection on a week of relief work in New Orleans

by Dr. Joe Siry, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies

The week of our rehab work is ending on a note of exhausted but upbeat emotions about having been part of 520-540 volunteers who worked at Camp Hope, St. Bernard Parish Louisiana. We stayed six days at a post FEMA, installation for volunteers assisting with hurricane and flood recovery in Chalmette, S.B. Parish, downriver from the ninth ward in New Orleans. About sixty students, faculty, and staff worked for five days, 8 AM to 3 PM, sometimes later and often earlier, to tear down the remaining damaged structures at a break-neck speed.

The sheer magnitude of the situation played on our thoughts and emotions as teams of students, ours was eleven strong, would work on each separate site in hardhat, mask, safety goggles and gloves. The effort could be excruciating—emotionally because of what you saw, picked up and found, and smelled. The daily work was physically exhausting because of the endless bending, hauling, lifting, moving or chopping of the obstacles to our removing the dry wall from the water soaked wood beneath the plaster facade.

So now we are on our way after giving a five-day's down payment in sweat equity on a national debt to these survivors. These were the residents of the Creole nation who are truly now a *Diaspora* of once healthy people living out their hopes and fears on their home ground. Scattered too, we will become, despite the depth of emotive opinions and excellence of manual effort that these young idealists and we put forth on an ever so brief January week after the fall term. The thoughts I was privileged to overhear ranged from bewilderment, to anger, to a feeling of disorder and awkwardness amidst the hardships of camp life. Those conditions in camp, including a lack of privacy, long walks to services, cold floors and still colder wash water—even for showers—slowly ate into the tissue of sanity that we so eagerly want and all too often take for granted. How surface is this state of our contentment? Arresting as it may be and resting on a veneer of warm water, restful bedding and private access to the toilet, we so often overlook our shallow fabric of services that exist to ease our affluent lives. We participants have certainly grown, or at least stretched a bit, but we have not I think understood in a visceral way why we ought not judge those who have left, or have unsuccessfully repaired, or failed to return to this site. For southern Louisiana remains a shifting ground where anyone may still find an assault on our senses, our comity and our sense of fairness.

Here and now we may not have come to terms with our way of living--or insulating ourselves from living-- yet we have come to some level of understanding of the tactile vulnerability of things. We have come also to understand our action's inherent risks when we measure our worth, or our success, merely by the number of possessions we accumulate. In the face of these devastated places some things have gotten in our way and while we may never understand how privilege too is an impediment to our progress in assisting anyone, then we do know how vulnerable we are when we endeavor to invest so much value in so many perishable items that we once loved, admired, or adored.