

## April 2006 Katrina Mission Trip to Pascagoula, Mississippi

On April 21, 2006 Neil Daley and I (Tom House) from the Warners UMC, went with a team of 12 North Central New York Conference volunteers on a mission trip to Pascagoula, Mississippi to help rebuild homes after Hurricane Katrina. While no words can really express what it is like 9 months after the storm I will try to tell you what I saw during the week that I was in Pascagoula, Mississippi. There wasn't much chance to sight see.

Sleeping quarters were above the gym at the Pascagoula United Methodist Church and they were spartan at best. In our room we had 5 men sleeping on the floor with air mattresses and sleeping bags. During the time that I was there 50 people from various churches were there to help. You slept with 5 to 10 in a room, even if you came with your wife you slept separately. Your day started with wakeup at 6:00 AM, breakfast at 6:30, devotion at 7:30 and work assignment at 7:45 and ran till 4:00 or 5:00. I was promoted to team leader on the second day for a group of myself and 3 women Katie, Amy and Ida due to my knowledge of repair from my apartment buildings so Neil Dailey our group leader could head a second team putting in cabinets.

On Monday and Tuesday we had a wonderful 73 year old woman that lost everything and was still living in a FEMA trailer parked right next to her house. Our job for 2 days was to sand and spackle the sheet rock that had been replaced 4 feet up from the floor throughout the entire house. The team fell in love with Laura and wanted to do extra things for her so we washed the mold off the entire front of her house, repainted the entire white trim and sanded down her weather beaten door, then put on three coats of polyurethane. Laura asked if she could borrow a ladder as hers was lost in the flood so the team purchased a new one and put our names and the various churches we came from on it. Laura had lost her husband a few years back, she is Presbyterian so this was a joint church restoration, but she handled the day care at the United Methodist church and headed the Women's Day Out program for mothers that were tied down so they could have a morning off. She did all this with the biggest smile and the greatest hugs as she said that was the only way she could pay us for our help. In reality these people gave us far more than we could ever give them as they were so very grateful for anything we did.

A little word on the FEMA Trailers, these are not upscale high class trailers, they are spartan with bare essentials, stove (3 burners) oven below and small refrigerator next to that. The bath and shower are combined with the toilet right next to it. If you were a large person you would probably have to go to the bathroom sideways (not kidding). The bedroom was wall to wall bed if you had a full size bed and the living room was a combination dining room and living room. The septic systems had white PVC pipe running from the trailer to wherever the septic field would be so you see these pipes running everywhere around houses. This is how Laura has lived for the past 9 months and her house isn't near done yet as her kitchen and bath have to be rebuilt. It will be many months before she gets back into her home.

This is a little about the devastation in the area. There are two ship building companies in Pascagoula, one is Northrop Grumman which was rebuilding two huge oil platforms that you could see for miles and another that I didn't know the name of. The total cost of the damage to just these two companies was 1 Billion Dollars. They are up and running with the employees working 12 hour shifts 7 days a week. Now the employees have had their houses damaged so it is very difficult for them to put in that much overtime and get anything done on their houses so the repair goes slowly but the money is needed so they are happy for the overtime, however, they are getting worn out.

Laura's house was 4 blocks from the Gulf so the damage was greater there; as you went down to the Gulf you would see many concrete pads where houses were, but no longer stood. One night after dark we went to Gulf Port the damage there and Biloxi was far worse. For 4 city blocks inland there were no houses, no businesses, just row after row of concrete pads and this went on for mile after mile. I said it was dark, it would have hit harder had it been daylight. There were no street lights, and one huge dusk to dawn light lit up just one standing porta-john which was the only thing in the whole area. Bridges were blown apart, railway bridges were blasted away. The last two days which I will talk about later we worked 8 miles inland and the man had built a house 3 feet above the flood plain map that showed the highest level of water ever reached in the last 100 years and yet he was 2 feet two low and still got flooded. As you got further back from the Gulf you see nothing but blue tarps still on most roofs which means there is a large amount of work to do. The tarps are beginning to rot under the hot sun and I doubt will last this summers heat.

On Wednesday we worked for Miss Lilly, who could be very demanding and wanted everything just perfect. She hovered over you to see that each item you did was done to perfection. She was 78, but didn't look a day over 50. She was lucky as she was 8 miles from the Gulf and only got 2 feet of water in her house so they cut the sheet rock at that level around her entire house. She was able to move most of her items to her second floor so she could still live in her house and nothing upstairs was damaged. Our job in this house was to replace and hang the sheet rock. I put Katie, Amy and Ida on the dinning room since there were no plugs to cut out while I did the laundry room that had a dryer vent, 6 plugs, 4 faucets and two sink drains to cut out. It was a very demanding day but still rewarding.

On Thursday and Friday we were given our most rewarding project as we went to Ron and Fran's house in Moss Point, Mississippi some 8 or 9 miles inland from the coast. Ron was undergoing Chemotherapy on Wednesday and was too sick for us to work at his house and that is why we went to Miss Lilly's. Fran was ill with MS, thus they needed more help than most. On Thursday our first day on the job they had to rush Ron to the Hospital as his blood pressure had fallen to 90/70 and he was doing poorly.

Our job was to sand and apply a final coat of spackle. The girls also took off the lower level of wall paper as it was ruined as well. I did the spackling. Fran asked me if I would make a molding rack so she could clean and paint what had been removed to get the sheet rock off. I had no idea what she wanted, but she said her friends had made one, then she took me there to see it. I started at 4:00 PM and finished it at 5:30. It came out better than expected, it was 3 A frames screwed together at the top into a 8 foot 2X4 about half way down a cross board was screwed to form the A frame then you put a 2X2 8 feet long in the middle to stabilize it. You then put nails 6" apart up each side of the frame. When you are done you can put 11 moldings on each side and paint them all at the same time. Then they wanted some plumbing changed in the bathroom. Whoever tore out the double sink had broken it so they wanted to go down to one sink. I capped the water lines and the sewer lines. When I started the job we needed parts so off to Lowes I was about to go. Ron asked if he could ride with me, I was quite concerned as he was so sick the day before, but Fran said it would be good for him so off we went. Lowes parking lot was full as usual, not full as in busy, full in that no parking places were left and you know how big those lots are. Each day they get at least one load of plywood and each day it is gone before noon. The same goes for sheet rock and shingles. The checkouts have long lines and this will go on for many years as this storm really isn't close to being cleaned up yet. Ron and I hit it off, he and Fran found out I worked for an oil Company so they asked me to explain the high prices which I did the best I could. They seemed to get the idea that there were several reasons. Fran came out one after noon and touched my shoulder saying I just wanted to touch the arm of a millionaire and that she was sure seeing that I was an Oil company employee that I made at least 3 million dollars a year. Ron was standing next to her as I put my arm around her shoulder and said " Fran, you don't know the half of it, that's just my bonus" she got the point and they both laughed. This is Ron's third bout with cancer and each chemo treatment is over \$50,000 and he has to have 6. His policy is for \$2,000,000 so he is quite concerned that he will outspend it as Fran also has special shots that can run as \$11,000 per year for her MS.

Back to Ron and my trip, he took me past the shipyard and told me about the damage, then over to the Chevron refinery where you still could see where the security walls had been blasted away by the 28' wall of water that got pushed ashore by the wind. We had a great ride that took far longer than the 10 minutes it took to fix the plumbing once I got back. The girls accused me of getting them started and then going sight seeing ( that was a running joke as I had the only car ). It was a super team effort all week long that was just wonderful to see develop during our stay. We hated to leave Ron and Fran as you just wanted to stay and put their house back together to give them some peace as it looked like life had treated them so unfairly. To see their smiles and get their hugs as well gave us more than we will ever be able to give to them.

Our church gives out "prayer pals " that are prayed for and passed around in the pews. They each have little sayings and a prayer that we hope this brings them some measure of peace and happiness in their lives and that we will follow them with our prayers if they will hold on to the pals they will hold our prayers. Each of the families was mailed one as I called home each night and gave the addresses to Kathy my wife. Since that time we have received great thank you cards in response to the pray pals.

This is a story of a man who had millions of dollars before Katrina, several people were put on a job to help rebuild his garage. Most volunteers at first felt they shouldn't be helping out a wealthy man such as this. As they worked with the towns people the story came out, he had lost everything, his business had been destroyed yet he kept all of his employees on his payroll going house to house helping people in his town rebuild. As he spent all of his money helping others the town got together along with the volunteers to rebuild his garage so he could start his business over at least out of the garage. These are daily stories of the good things that are going on down there, but it will be several years before it will be business as usual.

At some point this year I will make a second journey to Pascagoula as this has been one of the most rewarding things I have ever done.

Tom House