

## “Why I go on Mission Trips”

By Tom House, November 2009

When my son was born in 1975 giving us a boy and a girl, my wife, Pat, and I were elated that we now had one of each. A week after her six week checkup the doctor called to say she had a tumor twice the size of her heart overlaying her heart. We were married for just 5 years; she went to the hospital many times during that fall and winter and while Sunoco had a great medical plan it didn't pay for parking, telephone, TV, flowers, magazines, etc. that I would pay on a daily basis. In addition, Jeff was allergic to his formula (which we didn't know) and Rebecca was having constant urinary infections so we were having constant doctor visits with them. Christmas was coming but it looked very bleak for this year as everything was being spent on illness.

Each Christmas every employee of Sunoco was given a \$20 check to make sure they would at least have a Christmas Turkey. I was called into the managers office (Chuck Linder) and there sitting on his desk was a 2 foot Christmas tree decorated with twenty dollar bills rolled up and tied in red bows. The office clerks, the drivers, the mechanics, the warehousemen, the service techs and other salesmen had donated their Christmas money so we could have Christmas. I vowed that day that someday I would return that gift in kind.

About 15 years ago the Warners United Methodist Church sponsored my son, Jeffrey House, and Jill Woodland, at about age 15, to go to Puerto Rico to rebuild a Methodist church leveled by Hurricane Hugo. Jeff had just taken up the guitar given to him by his grandparents. The minister at that church would sing his sermons to the congregation each day. He took Jeff under his wing and each evening they would go down to the ocean and sing together the songs for the sermon for the next day. It changed my son's life forever. When Jeff returned home he told me that I must go on one of these mission trips as they were awesome!!

I didn't think about this again until Katrina hit and then I decided it was time to go. Jeff was right, it was fantastic beyond words. John Weed, another team member, came up with the best definition: “Think of the best gift you have ever GIVEN, then think of the anticipation of the opening of that gift and the joy you get as it is opened. That is what it is like to help these people. What a “high” - there is nothing like it.” On my first trip I helped rebuild the home of Miss Laura, a 74 year old widow, who ran Mothers Day Out at the Pascagoula Methodist Church. A 4 foot wall of water had blasted through her house.

I also worked on Fran and Ron Bacak's house. They were a special couple. He had cancer and she had MS. They had built their home 5 feet above the highest flood levels of the past 50 years and were 2 feet too low. I promised them if Ron would keep fighting his cancer that I would return and take them out to dinner. The following year I kept that

promise and took them to a special place in Biloxi which had all the hurricanes that ever hit that area marked by the stain of the water level of that storm. I found out just before I went down on my third trip that Ron had passed away and that dinner was the only “fun” thing he had done all year.

On my second trip we worked on Clarence and Marilyn Brands home who lost everything. Also Marilyn had taken an 8 feet fall off her back porch ripping up her knee. She gave those great Mississippi hugs that I will never forget as she came over one afternoon and went from person to person thanking you and giving hugs.

Tony and Rose Haley lost everything as their house was flattened by a tornado within Katrina. We all donated \$20 and bought them a Christmas tree and all the trimmings.

On my fourth trip we helped Felice Haydel. She had moved to Pass Christian 7 years earlier to help her husband’s mother through an illness. She died a year later. The following year her husband died from colon cancer. The next year her sister went on vacation to Las Vegas and was killed in an automobile accident. Falice took on the responsibility of raising her two children. The next year Katrina hit and she lost her house and her daughter’s house across the street. Two weeks before we arrived she had lost her job. Falice had many reasons for being down, but I have never seen a more upbeat individual in my life! She just didn’t know the meaning of the word quit!!

Yes, you fall in love with all of those that you work for.

I would like to conclude with a prayer that I start saying a month before I leave for a mission trip:

Lord, take my hands and help someone. Take my heart and heal someone. Take my energy and rebuild someone. Let me work for someone that gives me such joy I want to return again. Then Lord, follow this team safely home to their families. Amen