

Report on Livingston County CARES January 2006 Work-Trip to Harrison County

Prepared by Tom Matthews, Chair Livingston County CARES

Thirty-three people traveled to Biloxi, Mississippi on January 4th to help with the hurricane recovery efforts and to establish contacts in Harrison County that will lead to long-term relationships between Livingston and Harrison Counties. The group included nine students and one faculty and two administrators from SUNY Geneseo, nine members of Geneseo Central Presbyterian Church, three team leaders from HOPE Unites, five students and one administrator from Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, and three community members connected to Livingston County CARES. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 73.

On January 4th members of the team traveled from Rochester, Buffalo, and New York to Biloxi, Mississippi. After a restaurant lunch near the Gulfport airport, the team moved into travel and trailer bunk houses at the Urban Life Ministries (ULM) Relief and Recovery Center on Howard Avenue in East Biloxi. The site is located on the grounds of a former VFW hall that was destroyed by Katrina.

The CARES group was briefed by Kevin Beck, a recovery staff member from ULM, and started work immediately clearing a large circus tent that had been used to feed victims during the emergency and relief efforts from September through December. Work teams also began replacing paneling and doors in an office, assembling office furniture, and doing major repairs on five ULM trucks and vans. Other teams helped move supplies, equipment, and furniture to various sites in East Biloxi. After Beck discovered that Sally Fox was a journalist, he invited her to take on a special project interviewing and chronicling the stories of some of the residents whose homes were being worked on by the volunteers. The stories put a human face on the devastation suffered in the area and plans are underway to incorporate these stories into a book about Katrina's impact on the Gulf Coast.

On Thursday morning, Harrison County District 5 Supervisor Connie Rockco, joined the team at the daily 7:00 am breakfast to extend greetings from Harrison County. Each day for three days, work started at 8:00 am and ended at dusk around 5:00 pm with an hour break for lunch. Dinner was served at 6:00 pm followed by team debriefing, discussion, and card games or small group conversations in the food tent and trailers. Lights went out around 9:00 pm and almost everyone was sleeping by 10:00 pm. Each day, teams were sent out to various sites in Biloxi to work on a variety of jobs ranging from demolition of interior walls and floors, removal of debris from houses and yards, mudding, sanding, painting, wiring, replacing windows and floors, and other structural modifications. Throughout the week teams worked at the Daisy G home on Fayard Street, the Gloria Jean K home on Bowen Street, the Olivia K home on Hannibal Court, the Ruth and Lerrie S home on Magnolia Street, and the Jasna Y home on Hopkins Boulevard. Another team also devoted Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning to help Steve B on 2nd Street in Gulfport clear extensive yard debris and remove destroyed personal items from his house.

Each day new small groups of Livingston CARES teams accompanied HOPE Unites team leaders to learn the recovery needs assessment process for potential ULM worksites. The process involved talking with home owners and walking through houses to determine their condition and estimate the materials needed and the work required for restoration.

During the trip, team members visited the D'Iberville High School and met with Vice Principal Heather Mitchell to explore ways that the schools in Livingston County could work with Harrison County schools. Ms. Mitchell shared the stories about her school and her personal experiences with the relief and recovery efforts. She expressed interest in the "cosmic gumbo café" curriculum project and indicated that her school would be interested in exchanges and possibly taking student teachers from SUNY Geneseo.

Team members were also invited to the Harrison County School District Office in Gulfport to meet with Dr. Cassandra Conner, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Technology. Dr. Conner expressed great interest in the "cosmic gumbo café" project, particularly because of the need for more arts instruction in the schools.

A team also traveled to Gulfport to meet Dr. Hal Higdon, Vice President for Administration of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and Dr. Carol Holley, Dean of Instruction at the Jefferson Davis Campus. Most of the MGCCC facilities were in decent physical condition after the hurricane but over 1500 of the students were unable to complete the fall term. Approximately 25% of the faculty and 25% of the students lost all their possessions and their homes. Higdon and Holly indicated that their faculty and students desperately need help to recover from the devastation. We explored the possibility of establishing faculty/staff pen pals through email and personal contacts, and possible adoptions of individual families that need assistance in rebuilding, or that work crews could help on future trips to Harrison County.

On Sunday morning a work crew returned to assist Steve in Gulfport and part of the team went to Sunday church services at the Methodist and Catholic churches in Gulfport. A team returned on Monday afternoon to discuss possible projects for the Livingston County Coalition of Churches. That team also visited the site of the only child care center that serves the low income families in East Biloxi and talked with the director, Carol Burnett. The team watched as several of their buildings were being bulldozed and carted away.

On Sunday afternoon the entire Livingston CARES team went on a tour of rural Harrison County with Connie Rockco to partake in an incredibly good Mississippi fish fry at a county restaurant operated by the wife of the Superintendent of the Harrison County Highway Department. Rockco also took us to the home of the mother of one of her employees who desperately needs assistance to repair her home. We also toured the Eagle Point area of Gulfport with middle and upper income houses where dozens of homes were destroyed and twenty-five people lost their lives.

On Monday morning the entire Livingston CARES team was invited to attend the organizational meeting of the Harrison County Board of Supervisors. At the beginning of the meeting Connie Rockco was elected President and presided over the second item on the agenda which was the CARES presentation to the supervisors. Tom Matthews briefly explained the history of CARES, Kristy Sirianni read a letter from Chris Dahl, President of SUNY Geneseo, and Wes Kennison read the resolution from the Livingston County Board of Supervisors. Rockco presented CARES with books on the Gulf Coast before and after Katrina.

During the remainder of the last day, teams went back to worksites and continued working until dusk on the various homes. Many posed for photos with the homeowners who invited the workers to come back to enjoy a home cooked meal and Mississippi hospitality.

Monday night everyone packed and on Tuesday morning all 33 team members departed immediately after breakfast in three vans and a trailer load of baggage for the airport. All members returned to their homes on Tuesday, January 10.

The Livingston CARES January Work-Trip Team included:

Christopher Basso	SUNY Geneseo Student
James Bryant	SUNY Geneseo Student
Rona Byers	Centerport, NY
Casey Carrigan	SUNY Geneseo Student
Kathy Collins	Presbyterian Church
Roger Collins	Presbyterian Church
Lois Dewitt	Hilton, NY
Gerald Fly	Geneseo, NY
Kay Fly	SUNY Geneseo
Sally Fox	Presbyterian Church
Amanda Gitomer	SUNY Geneseo Student
Rev. Charles Gommer	HOPE Unites
Linda Hatheway	Presbyterian Church
Melanie Hazelton	Wilfrid Laurier University
Tom Kapsimalis	Wilfrid Laurier University Student
Weston Kennison	Livingston County Board of Supervisors
Lyle Lehman	Presbyterian Church
Edith Matthews	Presbyterian Church
Betsy Matthews	Presbyterian Church
Tom Matthews	SUNY Geneseo
Howard McGlaufflin	HOPE Unites
Joan McGlaufflin	HOPE Unites
Kevin Morris	Wilfrid Laurier University Student
Corey Norman	Wilfrid Laurier University Student
Jianan Ong	Wilfrid Laurier University Student
Kevin Reilly	SUNY Geneseo Student
Sarah Reinschmidt	Andover, NY
Tegan Serianni	SUNY Geneseo Student
Laura Shellhammer	SUNY Geneseo Student
Kristy Sirianni	SUNY Geneseo Student
George Sullivan	SUNY Geneseo Student
Charlotte Torres	Presbyterian Church
Katie Walhout	Wilfrid Laurier University Student

2-1-06