

Report on the November Flood Relief Work Trips to the Binghamton Area

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During the last week of June 2006, the northeast was hit by a storm of tropical proportions, dumping unprecedented rainfall into its rivers and streams. One of the major rivers to flood its banks was the Susquehanna. At 1am on June 29th, the river reached its crest in Binghamton, breaching 1930s floodwalls and inundating the surrounding area with murky water.

Conklin NY, just south of Binghamton, was one of the hardest hit areas. It is here that we focused our relief work. The area is a federally designated disaster zone, and there a number of homes that are condemned and still remain vacant. Three Presbyterian churches from the surrounding area joined together to help the families that were devastated by the flood. They estimate that there are about 900 homes in need of repair.

Both of our SUNY Geneseo groups stayed at the First Presbyterian Church in Johnson City, just west of Binghamton. Four students went from Nov. 3rd-5th and seven from the 17th-19th. Our host was Pastor Robert Peek, and his hospitality and stories added a wonderful element to the trip.

The first group worked on a house where the water has filled the basement and reached to almost 4 feet on the main level. The plaster walls and floors had already been torn out and the house was ready for new sheetrock. Over the span of two days, we were able to hang all of the drywall in the house, including the entire kitchen and sunroom, as well as finish spackling and placing corners. We worked from about 9-5, Saturday and Sunday. By the end of Sunday, we could begin to see a difference in Steve, the homeowner. It was difficult for him to work on his own house, after trashing his waterlogged belongings, and tearing out a beautiful 50-year-old oak floor. But as we left, and I thought I sensed a bit of hope in Steve.

The next group planned to return to Steve's and paint his whole house. But nature once again intervened. On November 16th, Binghamton again experienced heavy rains—4 inches in 3 ½ hours. It wasn't enough to flood the Susquehanna, but it did turn lazy creeks into cascading rivers. Homes that were spared from the June flooding, now found their basements full of water. Some homeowners lost 5 feet of land to a violent torrent of water pouring down a creek in their backyard. And there were some homes from the June flood that had to go through the some ordeal all over again.

Given the circumstances, the second SUNY Geneseo team took assignments for newly flooded homes. We traveled to an area called Conklin Corners, where a number of creeks cross paths and came together. The area was in bad shape. Sediment had been deposited all over the roads and lawns, indicating that the water had literally been flowing everywhere. An addition to a home had collapsed into the creek when the water eroded away the foundation. There was garbage and scraps everywhere.

We worked on a house where there had been about a foot of water on its main floor. We were there from about 9-5 on Saturday and Sunday. We helped the homeowner carry out her wet belongings and discard the items that were ruined. We then got down to the dirty business of getting the mud off the floors and out of the house. Using a strong cleaning solvent, lots of scrub brushes, and a shop vac., we were able to get it clean. It was a dirty job, but one that I could not have imagined the homeowner taking on alone. Our group of seven volunteers really helped to get their house clean and ready for new life. They had been planning on doing some renovations, and this presented the perfect opportunity. Talking about the different possibilities helped lend a different light to the situation and lighten the devastating circumstances.

There is still a lot of work to be done in the Binghamton area. There are some condemned homes that haven't been touched yet. They'll likely need volunteers well into the summer to help with the rebuilding effort. The Geneseo students enjoyed the trips and may go down again in the spring.