



News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**University of St. Thomas Students and Staff Help
Hurricane Katrina Victims over Spring Break**

HOUSTON (March 13, 2006)—Over spring break, University of St. Thomas students and staff participated in a relief mission to New Orleans to help Hurricane Katrina survivors. Sister Clare Hunter, FSE, UST campus ministry coordinator, and Matt Gustafson, assistant director of recreational sports, led 10 UST students on the volunteer opportunity, Operation Helping Hands, initiated by Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans.

Students focused on residential and neighborhood cleanup for the disabled, the elderly and those without the financial means to reoccupy their homes. UST students helped remove appliances, furniture, damaged walls, ceilings, floors, wiring and other household goods from homes. Once a home was cleared, students sprayed the residence with a sanitizing solution to kill bacteria and mold.

“My experience in New Orleans has really put things into perspective for all things we take for granted,” freshman volunteer Nanette Platter said. “I will keep this alive in my mind and remember every day how much I have and what these people have had to deal with.”

The volunteer team from UST is one of more than 82 groups that are scheduled to contribute more than 2,600 volunteers to Operation Helping Hands over the next six months.

“We are honored to have been a part of this historic experience and are grateful for the opportunity to spend our spring break in New Orleans,” Sr. Hunter said.

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Sister Clare Hunter's Journal Entry of the Spring Break Trip in New Orleans

Although the group came to help, the experience has been a humbling one, and we have received much more from the amazing survivors with whom we have worked. Beginning on Sunday, we group were assigned to clearing out and gutting damaged homes. On Sunday, we worked on Ms. Silvia Mitchell's home which had over three feet of water damage. Ms. Mitchell spent the day with us, along with her son and granddaughter who helped tear down walls, and remove literally everything in the house, with the plans to rebuild.

Monday, we moved to a new neighborhood, where again, every home was significantly damaged. As we worked, we saw no one in the neighborhood, except men coming to remove the rubble. Tuesday, the group experienced it most severely damaged home, that belonging to Ms. Oneida Polk's, in Gentilly Parish. Ms. Polk was born and raised in this neighborhood, and lived in her home for 40 years raising her two children. Her husband died over 20 years ago, and she has lived alone in her home, which was filled with memorabilia and was the archive of family photos. Ms. Polk spent the day with us, tenderly looking through the handful of items we salvaged from the house, and shared touching stories with each of us. When she arrived, we handed her two photos we found, and she began to cry. They were photos of her beloved aunt Rose, and her mother; the only two items she was hoping to recover, and the only picture that existed of her aunt Rose. This gave the group the energy we needed to remove literally every object she owned from her home and to get it ready to be rebuilt. We worked from 8 a.m. – 4 p.m. and were joined by a group of seven from Holy Cross College, from Worcester, MA.

Freshman, Nanette Platter, interviewed Ms. Polk and had the opportunity to learn a great deal about this wonderful woman. Nanette said that "the work is easier when you know the people you are working for, and learn their story. It gives it a different energy when you have a relationship with the people and know how much they have suffered."

After we finished our work on Ms. Polk's home, a local volunteer gave us a tour of the 9th Ward where we saw the most breath-taking devastation any of us had ever seen. Our guide told us that not a single piece of debris has been touched as they are still assessing the damage and determining the future of this area. Homes on the left side of the street, are now piles of brick, wood and mud on the right side of the street. Cars are strewn everywhere, clothing hanging from broken tree limbs, and the remnants of children's toys, shoes and personal items scattered as far as the eye can see, sealed in our minds the reality that the road to recovery is in the far distance. Day after day we hear miraculous stories about bravery, survival and resilience. We are honored to be a part of this historic experience and are grateful for the opportunity to spend our Spring Break in New Orleans.

Sr. Clare Hunter, FSE, is available for interviews. Call 713-525-3588.



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