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Tucson teens perform hard work in Big Easy Volunteers clear out Katrina-ravaged duplex

By RENEE SCHAFER HORTON

For the Tucson Citizen

They'd seen the pictures. They'd heard the stories. But nothing could prepare them for the smell.

"What IS that?" one asked, her hand flying to her mouth.

"It smells like foul fish mixed with poop," someone replied.

"Or something worse," another added.

Standing on a porch in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward nearly a year after Hurricane Katrina tore southern Louisiana to shreds and breached levees drowned half the city, nine Tucson teens pulled blue industrial dust masks over their faces, strapped on plastic goggles and crossed the threshold of what some locals call "Katrina Hell."

They had to muscle open the doors because floodwaters had rearranged the furniture inside, blocking the entrance.

Sam Zelinski, Chris Martinez, David Chan, Briana Zelinski, Alexis Saleido, Clare Horton, Vincent Vasquez, Marie Robillard and Alicia Carbajal stepped into knee-deep moldy, moist debris, the tattered lives of two families.

Most homes in this low-income, low-lying area of New Orleans took on about 5 feet of water during Katrina, leaving contents destroyed.

The neighborhood resembles a war zone, streets piled high with the innards of gutted houses, windows shuttered, cryptic markings spray painted by the National Guard on outside walls to show who or what was found inside after floodwaters forced people into their attics.

People are conspicuously absent.

None of that bothered the Tucson teens.

They worked amid a carpet of roaches, occasional rodents, nests of spiders and incessantly biting mosquitoes.

Their goggles fogged up from the heat and humidity, and sweat dripped from their faces.

At the end of the day, they collapsed, exhausted.

While their friends were making plans for summer vacation, these members of Teen Relief were making a difference.

"About two weeks after the hurricane, I was talking to my dad, trying to figure out what we could do," said Sam Zelinski, the primary force behind Teen Relief.

"I was thinking long run because usually the United States supports things in the short run, but once something is old news, everyone forgets. I knew they would need continuous help."

He brainstormed fundraising events with other teens in the Youth St. Vincent DePaul organization at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Parish.

Donations from teens attending Sunday youth group meetings piled up, and, in December, Teen Relief sent \$1,000 to Josephite Father Joe Campion, a priest helping in the Lower 9th Ward

In his thank-you note to St. Elizabeth's youth minister, Campion asked if teens would be interested in taking a "field trip" to help rebuild New Orleans.

Government officials, he said, had issued a mandate that owners of flooded homes must gut them by Aug. 31 or have the properties revert to city ownership and be bulldozed to make way for green space or condominiums.

Because many of his parishioners were evacuated to other cities, his flock needed help.

That's where groups such as Teen Relief come in.

Sam Zelinski gathered together a group of friends who understood going to Mardi Gras town would be about work, not fun.

Those 13- to 20-year-olds held two more fundraising events, a dance and what they called a Wake-A-Thon, in which people pledged money for each hour they could stay awake over Rodeo weekend.

By May, they had raised about \$2,000, barely enough to cover renting a 12-person van.

Then an anonymous out-of-state donor sent \$2,500 to cover van rental, gas and food, which left the group with money for tools and a donation to Campion.

The group headed east July 14 with three chaperones, arriving in New Orleans two days later. There, they met John Gentles, a 59-year-old missionary aide to Campion who would work alongside the teen volunteers.

"Some people need a push to get back here and claim their houses," Gentles told the group, referring to the city mandate. "Some won't come back. Some shouldn't. Everybody's blaming everybody else. But Father Joe is in there, shovel and spade, trying to help people keep their houses if they want."

After four six- to nine-hour days in the suffocating heat, Teen Relief members had dragged more than 2,000 square feet of furniture, appliances, clothing, carpet and sheetrock out of the duplex and onto the street curb for city trash crews.

"You can eat food off that floor now and only get a little sick," Martinez, 16, said jokingly when the last sheetrock nail came out of the studs.

Gentles said he was "in awe" of Teen Relief, because he's supervised a number of groups coming in from other cities and not all have achieved as much as the Tucson group.

"What was more impressive was the spirit of love, joy and serving in which they carried out the work," Gentles said. "They have truly touched the hearts of those they met in New Orleans."

Members said they would go again in a heartbeat.

"It was a great experience," said Carbajal, who celebrated her 18th birthday by hauling a refrigerator out of the duplex. "Maybe if other Tucson teens hear about us going, they'll help out, too."

Horton, 17, agreed.

"I'm not going to lie," she said. "When we first got there, I looked at all the houses that needed work on that block and thought, 'What difference will this one house make?' But it does make a difference. . . . Now, in the neighborhood where we worked, there is a shining, clean, gutted beacon of hope. It comes in the form of a house - our house."

Tucson writer Renee Schafer Horton is mother of one of the participants and spent July 17-21 with the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's Teen Relief team in New Orleans.

VOLUNTEERS

When encouraging your children to volunteer, earlier is better.

"Kids need to learn to give as well as receive," said Ellen Hargis of the Volunteer Center of Tucson.

Hargis encourages parents to volunteer with their children as often and as early as possible.

The center has lists of activities families can do together to help others, she said. Children as young as 3 or 4 can feel good about helping.

"Kids learn their basic values from their family," Hargis said. "Volunteering and service and philanthropy are values that need to be built in when they're young."

Contact

Teens who would like to get involved in Teen Relief or help with fundraising should call Teresita Scully, youth minister at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Parish, 8650 N. Shannon Road, 297-7357.

Those wanting to do volunteer work can call the Youth Volunteer Corps at the Volunteer Center of Tucson, 886-6500.

The Volunteer Center has information about opportunities for people of all ages willing to offer their time.

PHOTO CAPTIONS: Photos by RENEE SCHAFER HORTON/Special to the Tucson Citizen
Brian Zelinski, one of the group's chaperones, and David Chan, 20, move a bathtub out of the duplex. Marie Robillard, 13, and Briana Zelinski, 19, shovel up the destroyed contents in the front room of the duplex. Ready to begin work on the last day, the group poses between the studs that still have to be stripped of nails. Front row (from left) are Alexis Saleido, Alicia Carbajal, Marie Robillard, Briana Zelinski, Sam Zelinski, Clare Horton. Back row: Vincent Vasquez, David Chan, Chris Martinez. Alicia Carbajal (from left), 18; Vincent Vasquez, 16; Chris Martinez, 16; and Clare Horton, 17, look at a deteriorated photo album found in the duplex. Although everything was supposed to be thrown away, the teens kept aside a pile of things they thought might be sentimental to the owners and left them on the porch after the work was done, including the photo album.

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