

A Volunteer's Reflection on the One Year Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina

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It has been over one year from the day that Hurricane Katrina struck both New Orleans and Mississippi on August 29, 2005, and it has been almost six months after the Disaster Shakti trip in March 2006. This essay is my personal reflection as one of the members of the March Disaster Shakti team. I have been moved to write because I feel it is important for volunteers to understand how this experience resonates with somebody even six months after the trip. This viewpoint is unique because it can offer a glimpse into the memories, feelings, and images that can last in your mind and heart after such an experience.

I returned from the trip feeling completely relieved and overwhelmed. I made a vow to myself during the trip to be grateful for everything I had. I also made a vow to try and write as much as I could because I never wanted to forget this experience. The biggest message I received from my experience was that people need to hear the stories of New Orleans and Mississippi residents. The townspeople revered Anderson Cooper of CNN because he wasn't reporting from the safety of a studio, but from the depths of the shattered homes and neighborhoods. I remember being struck by the Hotel Monteleone staff commenting on how vital it was for Disaster Shakti to tell their stories to everyone. I felt a huge burden from this request because I was struggling (and still continue to struggle) to find the words to describe the trip. I knew that my friends and family would be receptive to hear everything that went on, but how do I engage other people about this without being overbearing?

I also had to remind myself that I needed to be receptive to the stories my friends and family wanted to tell me about their own experiences. This may seem like an easy task, but it was very hard to return to normal conversations about football, television, school, and work. It was not because these stories weren't important in their own ways, but once you come back from a disaster area, it is difficult to re-enter your everyday surroundings. To be honest, I felt disinterested in hearing about people's vacations or funny reality television shows. For the first two weeks of my return, I began to hate reality television with a passion. "This is not reality. If they want reality take these people down to the Lower Ninth Ward." Simple things like taking a shower, watching television, or calling my friends suddenly had a tremendous new value to them. Also, since returning, I have been extremely conscious to always tell my friends and family how much they mean to me.

So, how did I end up describing the trip? I began by telling everyone that it was an "emotional rollercoaster." This short summary seemed to really nail the core of my feelings. The descending lows consisted of describing the Lower Ninth Ward. As I told these stories, I still felt uneasy because there was no way I could do any justice to the visual images of the Lower Ninth Ward. There was no way I could describe the mold and smells that permeated throughout the homes. There was no way I could describe how I felt seeing children's dolls and cars thrown all over the street. It was difficult to describe feelings as well, such as the tremendous sense of awe I felt during a church service in New Orleans. I was amazed to see people holding hands and singing praise to God. I couldn't believe people were singing praise while they literally sat there without the basic needs of food, clothing, or shelter. I consider myself an optimist, but I am not sure how strong my faith would hold if I encountered the devastation these people endured.

I told a lot of the guys about rebuilding the homes and taking down all of the mold in the houses. They loved those stories because most of my friends had never pictured me doing manual labor before. I knew that I could share these stories with my friends and family for hours. I struggled however to give my co-workers and other acquaintances the brief version of the trip. I hated summarizing my trip and experiences into short casual conversations at the beginning or end of the job. I decided that I would not summarize any aspect of my trip for any of my co-workers or classmates. I wanted them to hear the whole thing and not just a nice adaptation that fits into a two to three minute coffee break. I wanted people to be moved like I was moved. I wanted them to picture every aspect of Gulfport or the Lower Ninth Ward. This was probably the most challenging aspect of returning back from the trip. I wanted all of my classmates, friends, and family to hear every aspect of my trip but only if they were willing to give me the time to really tell it.

Fortunately, during the trip I had taken over ten hours of footage on a hand-held camera. I knew that this footage would become my way to find a voice for this experience. I decided that I needed to turn this footage into a DVD for my fellow team members and me. I had spoken frequently with other Disaster Shakti members and it seemed that we were all struggling with how to tell this story to our friends and family. It was easy for me to talk with the Shakti members about our trip because we could easily picture what it was like. The Shakti team was a huge support for me on my return. It was very gratifying to turn to Anders (my roommate during the trip) and speak to him about how he felt upon returning. It was comforting to hear that my fellow members were going through the same feelings of being both grateful, upset, eager to tell their story, and genuinely proud of what we had accomplished.

I began organizing nearly 10 hours of video footage. I took this mission upon myself because I felt it was my way to heal from this process. I felt a DVD would be a very easy way for all of the Shakti members to get their story out to as many people as possible. The first thing I wanted people to see was the Lower Ninth Ward. I vividly remember walking around into people's shattered homes and just feeling awe-struck. In the background, construction workers were repairing the levees. All you can hear throughout the film is a huge crane banging in a slow rhythm. To me, it sounded like the death knell. It sets a very ominous tone for the entire footage. I began to insert captions into each piece of the footage. "This was Dr. Z's godmother's home" read one of the captions. All you could see literally was an old pickup truck and a huge pile of rubble. While walking in the Ninth Ward, I remember just holding the camera and struggling to believe the images were real. I recall trying to zoom in everywhere, so that you could truly see everything. At one point, I simply focus on my feet walking through the rubble. I focused on my feet because I wanted people to see that the debris was everywhere. I actually tripped on a piece of shingle that once belonged to someone's roof. I had never really filmed anything before in my life. I remember thinking that all I needed to do was simply turn on the camera and the images would merely speak for themselves. I managed to put together the Lower Ninth Ward footage and I showed the final video to all of my family members who contributed money for me to go on the trip. My family is loud, boisterous, and very funny, but everyone was speechless upon seeing this film. You couldn't see this footage anywhere. This wasn't Sean Penn's attempt at a photo op. This was raw, vivid footage that I felt finally did some justice to my stories. Once you could see and hear what it was like, you could picture yourself in that situation. Everyone began to question, what if that was our home? What if that was us?? Where would we go and what would we do?

Everybody likes to hear stories. The best story that I told of the trip was short, but really seemed to prompt a reaction by everyone that heard it. As much as I tried to avoid brief summaries of my trip, I felt compelled to tell this story no matter how much time somebody had to talk. Laekecia, a mental health practitioner at Hotel Monteleone, told us that her neighbor's home had drifted in the water and smacked right into her home. Her home was badly damaged from the wreckage. She called up her insurance company who stated that she could not be reimbursed for the damages. This was obviously puzzling, so she inquired why her claim was denied. The insurance company stated that she did not have collision on her house and, therefore, could not be reimbursed. Everybody I told this story to burst into loud gasps of shock and anger upon hearing that she needed collision on her house. "Collision?? Who would ever think to buy collision on a house?? This story to me symbolized the struggle New Orleans residents face everyday in trying to rebuild their homes and lives.

After putting together the Lower Ninth Ward footage, I then began to assemble the footage taken at Mississippi where we walked around Gulfport. The scenes were eerily similar to the Ninth Ward except that most of the houses in Mississippi were no longer on their foundations. We walked pass a swimming pool which was filled to the top with all kinds of debris. At the end of the footage, I managed to zoom in on a brick staircase that lead to nowhere. There was a sign on the bricks stating not to remove the bricks because the owner planned to return.

I began to assemble all of the interview footage captured during our conversations with the Monteleone Hotel staff and Gulfport residents. We interviewed Lela, a counseling psychologist working for Americorps, in her FEMA trailer. Lela is a mental health practitioner that volunteers her time by counseling Mississippi residents affected by Katrina. Throughout the

footage, I managed to pan around the trailer. I remember commenting to Anders that the trailer was nicer than I expected. There was a large couch that accommodated everyone, and the appliances seemed brand new. The bedroom was a decent size as well. However, I can't believe that this is her home and may still likely be her home. After I gathered together all of the interview footage, I remember being humbled by just how generous everyone was that talked with us. You always hear about "Southern hospitality" but it was truly evident. We interviewed a librarian in Gulfport. The previous library had been destroyed, so FEMA provided a mobile home to store any salvageable books and movies. The librarian gave us huge hugs on our way out and greeted everyone with a big embrace. Tons of volunteers came pouring into the library to take a break from building homes. You could feel the sense of community and resourcefulness. People were just trying to get back into their normal everyday lives. The mobile library was as good a community gathering place as ever in a Mississippi town where there was no intact house.

The final remaining bits of footage were light hearted and much needed. I managed to capture my roommate snoring on film. I narrated the entire scene and started laughing uncontrollably on camera. I still laugh every time that I see it. I loved this footage because I captured this moment after we went to see the Lower Ninth Ward earlier that day. I was extremely upset and I needed to unwind. I couldn't sleep at all, and turned to humor as a coping aid. This was my first time doing any volunteer trip; I had never seen a disaster area. As much as I wanted to embrace every aspect of everyone's story, I needed to take care of myself as well. My best advice for future volunteers is to always engage in some form of healthy self-care. A simple joke, smile, song, or call to a family member can easily help you out. I needed every hug and smile when I returned, and I got plenty of them. Learn some relaxation exercises before you

leave for disaster relief work. Keeping a daily journal heals the hurts you feel when you listen to others in pain.

Upon completing the DVD, I was elated and felt I really accomplished something. I put countless hours into formatting the DVD and making everything look just right. I wanted this to be my crowning achievement of the trip. I wanted this DVD to become an excellent visual presentation of just what we did out there. I was struggling so badly to accurately describe my experiences that I wanted to feel comfortable letting the DVD do the talking for a while. Disaster Shakti held a meeting approximately a month after returning, and I gave every member a DVD of the trip. I cannot convey how much pride I felt in sharing that with everyone. I strongly encourage everyone to film their volunteer experience. I felt that my words carried me very far in describing the experience, but the DVD was a visual story that added a surreal quality to the stories. Every person I showed it to was amazed to see how really damaged New Orleans was. This was footage that you could not see on prime time television. These were real people with real tears and real stories. These are the people that still to this day are looking for answers.

It still amazes me to hear that only 50% of the population has returned to New Orleans one year later. I remember hearing that the first time in Hotel Monteleone six months after the Hurricane. I never thought I would hear it again a year later. I have been reading Wendy Vincent's journal entries from her August Disaster Shakti volunteer experience in New Orleans. Her entries describe similar feelings echoed by the March Disaster Shakti trip volunteers. Upon her return, she describes listening to another woman argue about trivial matters such as a bus schedule. I can definitely sympathize with Wendy's feelings because there were many moments that I felt that many of my complaints or issues were so trivial compared to what the people in New Orleans were going through. I had to remind myself that a mediocre grade on a research

paper was not worth getting upset over when people in New Orleans were practically begging for insurance money to buy a home. After seeing the photos posted by Gargi Roysircar, the leader of Disaster Shakti, in the Community Discourse folder on her recent trip in New Orleans, it has become painstakingly clear that New Orleans residents need help, not just for now, but for five years, for ten years. My Shakti roommate, Anders, saw Spike Lee's film and wrote the following in his e-mail to me:

Director Spike Lee's HBO produced documentary, "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts" does a phenomenal job at looking at all the issues concerning the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He accomplishes this by looking at events before, during, and after the storm that exacerbated this human tragedy. The story is told through both raw images and the words of those who lived through it. Although immensely draining and difficult to watch, this film is the best summation of the complexity of what happened that I have seen in any media. Lee does this by maintaining a neutral stance, allowing those involved to paint a picture through their narratives, rather than predetermining the conclusions for the viewer. In addition to wonderful direction, the film has a powerful score, integrating jazz of all types as a mournful lament.

I strongly urge any of my fellow classmates or anyone pondering community service to engage in a volunteer disaster recovery trip like mine. I had never done anything like this in my life, but I am so proud of myself for doing this. I have learned much about myself. I carry with me many memories from New Orleans, and I am glad that I have captured some of these memories on a DVD for future volunteers to look at. Six months afterwards, I still sit here thinking about how to put together the words for this trip. I still struggle with how to tell the story, and I still get upset with myself for being mad over trivial things. I still hope that I can hold true to my vow to bring the stories of New Orleans to all my friends, family, and anyone willing to hear them. This reflection was an attempt to hold myself accountable to my vow and to serve as an honest account of one volunteer's experience.