

Spring Break in the Gulf: ASC students "Raise a Roof" in Mississippi

By Julian Maendel, ASC student

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE OF CATHOLIC LIFE

BAY SAINT LOUIS, MI- There is a deplorable yet recurring trend that often characterizes our collective and individual response to natural disasters.

In the immediate aftermath, an overflow of empathic sentiment is manifest, accompanied by vast quantities of manpower and materiel flowing into the area in crisis.

As time passes, however, cable news networks turn their cameras to other, more "current" topics, and in the rat race of everyday life, it is often more convenient to simply forget the continued suffering of those in affected areas.

When compared to the comfort and security of our own lives, they and their problems can quickly become mere blips on the periphery of our worldview. The response to Katrina's devastation along our Gulf Coast has followed such a trajectory.

In an attempt to reverse this creeping apathy and in acknowledgment of the continued rebuilding needs of those trying to scratch their way back to normalcy, the Adams State College, ASC, Newman Club organized a Spring Break trip to Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi.

Twelve other students and I, fearlessly and effectively led by United Campus Ministry director Shirley Atencio, drove down to the Gulf of Mexico and spent four days working with Habitat for Humanity building new homes.

Two long, monotonous, sleep-deprived drives through the uninspired wasteland of Texas notwithstanding, the week proved both educational and rewarding. At first, it was hard to comprehend the extent of the hurricane damage that remains, a festering eyesore along the coast of Mississippi and its unlucky sister state, Louisiana.

During two evenings, we took a fifty-minute drive west to New Orleans from the St. Rose de Lima Outreach and Recovery center where we stayed. Entire neighborhoods of the city remain abandoned, leaving only boarded up skeletons of "surviving" houses. Both there and in Bay St. Louis, entire homes had been swept off their foundations by the hurricane's storm surge and lay broken and sagging wherever they had settled.



Left: In front of the house, back row, l-r: Kate Williams, Julian Maendel, Rhonda, Amy Vandyck, Shirley Atencio, Matt Kuykendoll, Kathy Archuleta; front row, l-r: Crystal Garcia, Sarah Fox, Jesse Bush, Amber Martinez, Evita Klava, Jan Vigil. Top: Students raise a roof truss. Photos courtesy of the students

Thousands of families remain refugees, relocated to cities throughout the U.S., harboring hopes of return. "Will rebuild, don't demolish roof" was the message spray-painted onto the leaning side of one hurricane-ravaged residence.

Our time was spent building a house for Rhonda, a single mother, and her teenage daughter. Like so many of those forced out of their homes by the storm, the two have lived the last two years in a tiny FEMA trailer.

During Katrina, Rhonda attempted to ride out the storm. She was left stranded for six hours on the roof of her former residence, mere yards from the beach. She was finally rescued, but the house was rendered unrecoverable, as were most of her material possessions.

Yet despite the juggernaut of deprivation she had been through, Rhonda went out of her way to welcome us and thank us for coming. On our first day of work, she and her aging parents grilled a hot lunch of burgers, a welcome alternative to the routine of sack lunches.

Where only a foundation existed, by day three all stud walls were standing, rafters were up, and plywood had been nailed to the outside. The work instilled within us a newfound respect for construction workers, espe-

cially after students who effortlessly cranked out five-page papers were brought to tears over wayward nails and smashed thumbs.

At the work site and the center, we met numerous young people there for the same reason, albeit for longer spells. Americorps and Conservation Corps volunteers included one group of twenty from Durango, with whom we debated the respective merits of the Wolf Creek and Purgatory ski areas, among other things. They, along with evening forays to New Orleans' French Quarter to sample the jambalaya infused the trip with an additional wonderful memories.

In the end, the experience convinced a number of us to explore possibilities of further direct participation in the ongoing Katrina relief effort. As the need for volunteers will not dissipate any time soon. For anyone in search of a meaningful and rewarding (both emotionally and, in the case of Americorps, financially) summer occupation, I would strongly encourage a close look at the many opportunities that exist in the areas in which we were privileged to work.

We discovered profound truth to words printed on the t-shirts presented us by Habitat for Humanity upon departure: "Who knew blisters could feel this good." ♣

Mesa State Campus Ministry: Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, Moses.... Ezequiel?

By Janet Johnson, Campus Ministry

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BAHIAKINO, MEXICO- God's word often is stories of persons who needed to leave their homelands. Ezequiel Perez-Soto, a Mesa State student who will graduate this spring, hopes to teach before pursuing his Masters degree. He and his family left their tarpaper home in the village of Ruiz Cortines #1, Sinaloa five years ago. He graduated first in his U. S. high school senior class and has completed two majors in college in four years!

Ez served as interpreter and guide when the Mesa State campus ministry took their seventh alternative spring break trip to Bahia Kino, Mexico, a fishing village that has grown more stable throughout the years of our visits. It's an attractive travel destination for U.S. fishermen.

However, the students from Mesa experience the "other side" of life in a resort area, traveling from Kino with Padre Eduardo Lopez and Seminarian Teodoro Ramirez Sasturain to Narcizo Mendoza. An extremely poor settlement, the villagers' one well is often dry for 2 or 3 weeks at a time. Burning mesquite roots to make charcoal is the only income.

The students helped clear land for a church. At dusk Padre "Lallo" celebrated Mass for the villagers and students in an open shed. It was a profound experience as Heidi Brungardt explained, "The Mass helped me realize the unspoken human spirit communicates through our faith with others around us."

Ashley Perez added "the simple Mass was beautiful as we all stood around a table, sang hymns and thanked God. After communion I bowed my head to pray and tears began to flow for all the joy I had seen in this poor village.

For Genevieve Sparks the most mean-

ingful moment was "meeting a man whose house had blown down and whose son was very sick. Yet, he said 'I have no reason not to smile because life would not be good if you didn't love it.'"

Traveling to Colonia Pilares with our guide Rosa Hernandez, our students cleaned and painted in the meager church for Easter. The men there are farm workers for the corporate farms nearby, earning \$10 per day.

Another highlight was rising early each morning to cook and serve breakfast to children at the new Desayunador (breakfast center). The children are asked to pay one peso (less than 1 cent) if they can. Many small children bring their infant brothers and sisters to eat at least one meal. The students also cleaned and painted the church owned kindergarten and early childhood school. Melissa Wesnidge painted an angel on the building's exterior to bless the children at play.

Student Mark Tucker explained, the best memories were the ones with the kids, "whether it was the kids getting out of class or helping us to clean the patch of land for the church or seeing them come into the breakfast center. Just seeing the kids brought a smile to my face!"

Our group also helped with a fundraiser for *Familias Unidas*, a Habitat for Humanity like project created and directed by our longtime friend Marisa Martinez, a missionary from Spain.

Padre Lopez answered the students' question of how the US might really help the people of Mexico by saying "a fence won't help. We should look at ways in which Mexican people could legally work temporarily in the US and be allowed to come home."

Rosa Hernandez answered the question by saying the U. S. or Mexican own-



Clockwise: Colonia Pilares, adults l-r: Ashley and Ezequiel Perez, Rosa Hernandez, Dona Maria, Melissa Wesnidge, Mary Tonello, Mark Tucker, Steve Tonello, Janet Johnson, and Jenni Martines. Children at the Breakfast Center. Genevieve Sparks, Mesa State freshman from Dolores, and tiny friend Perla Patricia. Photos by Mark Tucker

ers of the large farms and manufacturing plants should pay their workers equitably. Also, workers should be allowed to have small amounts of food from the farms they work on. Currently, if a worker has any farm food in their possession they will be jailed, for two or more years.

Perez summed up the importance of her five alternative spring break service trips journaling, "it may seem impossible to fix Mexico and all of the poverty in the world, but it (poverty) must be bro-

ken down. For example *Familias Unidas* over the past 16 years helped the people of Kino to build 175 houses. This is how social justice works- helping one family at a time. I believe if everyone in the U.S. went on a mission they would be forever changed." Perez has applied for a Masters degree program in anthropology with an emphasis in immigration.

Hopefully, God will bless all the students with a life long compassion for people and a passion for justice! ♣