

## STM Young Adult Volunteers in New Orleans

Let us rejoice that one of our young adults, Danny Treat, is very generously giving of his time and talents for another year to help the people of New Orleans, through a Catholic Charities program called Operation Helping Hands. Please keep him and everyone there in your prayers!

Danny was due in New Orleans the same week that Gustav was advancing up the gulf coast! He and his dad, Jim, were trying to make this trip in as safe a manner as possible. Here are Jim's ponderings on the journey:

*Before we left on Saturday we had began following the track of hurricane Gustav trying to determine when to leave. As we had non refundable hotel reservations for Saturday and Sunday nights we decided to stick with our travel schedule and hope for the best. While we traveled on Sunday Janice kept us up to date on the storm and Danny received many text messages from his friends with Catholic Charities who were evacuating from New Orleans. Sunday afternoon we realized we shouldn't go into Louisiana and made arrangements to stay in Lewisville, Texas. We spent the next two days watching the news and the internet, trying to decipher the real facts from the TV journalism hype. Our best source of information was the New Orleans web site where we were able to keep up with evacuation notices. This waiting was far more stressful than I ever imagined, considering I had nothing personally to lose. It really drove home how much these storms affect the lives of the people who live in New Orleans.*

*On Tuesday morning Danny heard from Paul Cook with Operation Helping Hands who asked if we would be willing to go to Baton Rouge to help with a group of disabled children who had evacuated there. We responded yes and were told to wait for more information. After waiting until late in the day we were informed that we would not be able to go to Baton Rouge. At 10:00pm we received a call that Paul would be using his home in Covington as a gathering place for all the displaced volunteers including Danny and I. Finally we could resume travel.*

*We left Lewisville at 4:00am on Wednesday, and as we made our way into Louisiana we hit some pretty stormy weather. When we stopped for gas in Alexandria, we were greeted with long gas lines, including trucks with 55 gallon barrels in the bed waiting to fuel up. As we approached Baton Rouge we tuned in a local radio station to keep up with traffic and weather. What we heard instead was the best use of radio I have ever experienced. The DJ was fielding telephone calls and coordinating callers who had needs with service providers as well as relaying what gas stations, grocery stores, and restaurants were able to supply services. This was interrupted by a tornado warning which left Danny and I clueless as to how to respond, so we just kept driving. We made several attempts in Baton Rouge to stop for lunch, but with power out over most of the city there were no services to be had, making us feel very blessed we had fueled in Alexandria. If the weather and downed trees weren't enough to keep our attention, the convoys of electrical repair trucks and tree trimming trucks provided an unusual sight, not to mention the 100 or more ambulances we passed. The steady stream of trucks*

*with trailers loaded with generators was a reminder that they did not expect to restore power to many areas quickly.*



*Wednesday night we were in Covington, which is across the lake from New Orleans, they had power but no cable tv or internet, a small inconvenience, but it meant we couldn't keep up with the news. Paul and his wife stopped to shop for provisions on their way home, as they had emptied their fridge and freezer before evacuating. Because the stores had all lost power perishables were in very short supply. Also, lines were long, as all those returning needed to restock as well. Our diet would be limited to burgers, hot dogs, Hawaiian style sweet buns and what dry goods they had in the house. In the spirit of New Orleans, as the volunteers began to show up, it was more of a reunion party atmosphere than a somber event. Some of the volunteers chose to help a facility for severely handicapped children evacuate, and listening to their stories made me feel guilty about having been in a comfortable hotel during the storm.*

*On Thursday we went to Saint Raymond, a Catholic church and school that was closed after Katrina and has been turned into a storage and work facility for Operation Helping Hands. There I was able to experience what returning after a hurricane is like. The facility did not have power but it did not have any real structural damage either. Helping to clean up the large branches and debris strewn about made me realize that even when it is not newsworthy, the amount of work required afterward is great. I also found out what happens when you evacuate quickly and do not have the time to empty the refrigerator and freezer. Again it was an eye opener (and nose closer) to realize how much of a burden just returning to normal is after an evacuation. I was amazed at how much monetarily a family could lose just in spoiled food, not to mention the expenses of living away from home for several days.*

*In the afternoon we were given an assignment by Catholic Charities to help a nursing home move back in. Now it was my turn to learn that the volunteers aren't able to pick and choose their assignments. We spent several hours unloading trucks full of food, bedding, medical equipment and (Ugghh) dirty laundry. The enormity of moving one nursing home hit me and then I wondered how it was possible to move as many care facilities as a city the size of New Orleans has. It was then back to St. Ray's to offload and secure the facility and to return to the other side of the lake.*

*Friday found us back in New Orleans, this time doing something I was a little more familiar with. We spent the morning picking up shingles and tarping a roof of an Operation Helping Hands client. I left for the airport after that having made new friends and wishing I could stay and help. The housing for the volunteers, including Danny, was still without power so they would be spending another night with the Cooks. —Jim Treat*