



## Bearing Witness to NOLA (*New Orleans, Louisiana*)

by Jane Schaller

Pastor Nicole Lamarche sensed the fervency of her Cotuit Federated Church flock as they approached the St. Bernard Project headquarters.

"We will each bear witness to our individual unique purpose," she said assuredly. "No matter why you have been drawn to embark on this mission, it will be the right one for you."

My decision to participate in the mission was never in question but that didn't keep me from worrying about what to expect. Images of what the world witnessed those days after the catastrophe – water to the rooflines, bodies floating by – blended with warnings of loose gators and widespread red ant infestation caused me to brace myself for the worst.

Looking apprehensively out of the minivan window, I mentally prepared to allegorically strap on the oxygen mask, breathe in and out normally and help those around me who needed it the most.

As our rented minivan tires sped away from the protective umbrella of hospitable volunteer coordinators, we knew two things for sure—life would never be the same and no matter what, we were going to help rebuild NOLA.

I had only met my fellow group members the day before, but already we melded together with ease. Fleeting glimpses of flattened housing foundations – painted bright pink to signify asbestos contamination with spray painted X's used to tally the condition of homes after the storm – only mildly tempered the group's upbeat spirit as we ventured toward our assigned project: the Doty family house.

Situated in a typical middle class neighborhood, its rebuilding seemed to be near completion. The block was typical in that the homes were nicely spaced apart with trees shading the sidewalks, but something was missing. Where were the families? Would the Dotys come home to a neighborhood or to a street full of empty houses?



Julia's white dry erase board.



Chase and Julia's warm welcome.

AmeriCorps volunteers, Chase Jones and Julia Alexander put anxieties to rest with their friendly welcome to what would be the location of our daily grind throughout the ensuing week. They confirmed that work began on the Doty family house in October 2009 (for details, please read the story on their Facebook page [http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Doty-House-A-St-Bernard-Project/154133426898?](http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Doty-House-A-St-Bernard-Project/154133426898?ref=search&sid=100000667357287.2944050994..1#1/pages/The-Doty-House-A-St-Bernard-Project/154133426898?v=info)

[ref=search&sid=100000667357287.2944050994..1#1/pages/The-Doty-House-A-St-Bernard-Project/154133426898?v=info](http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Doty-House-A-St-Bernard-Project/154133426898?v=info).)

Chase beckoned us toward improvised chairs made from inverted paint cans as he and Julia began the assimilation process that would keep us informed, energized and heard.

After introductions, our new supervisors filled us in on what needed to be done with the help of a white erase board. Our jobs included sanding, painting, caulking, learning how

to use the power saw and helping to hang closet doors. Julia used the white board to keep the workload literally and figuratively within reach.

After organizing and containing the trash, the women went outdoors to spend the remaining hours painting closet doors and baseboard trim in a soothing whiteness. The men began the process of framing bi-fold doors inside, as Chase's paint-splattered radio belted out familiar hits.

Lunch was served under partly cloudy skies, packed the night before amid the splendid chaos of post-dinner clean-up and pre-breakfast wrangling. Missing from the Doty family home was running water, which necessitated minivan bathroom breaks over to the local gas station, then later at the nearby house Chase shared with other volunteers.

Our first day was a blur of paint, laughter and rays of white light streaming through the Doty family living room windows.



*Work station inside of the Doty family home*

We continued to meld into comfort mode on the ride back to our St. Matthew's Church dormitory. Covered in paint and weary in a relaxed, wholesome way, we couldn't resist marveling at the drive-through daiquiri places while taking in the beauty of New Orleans spring flowers.



Pastor Nicole's mood appeared solemn and her body weary as she lit candles and distributed the makeshift hymnals to the first few Cape Cod contingents to arrive at the nightly prayer and share meeting.

Sitting on the overstuffed couch next to a Barnstable pastor clad in pajamas and alongside people I hardly knew at all prior to the last few days, singing hymns and reciting scripture, was all comfortingly surreal. The gratification felt earlier began to fade as the other two groups relayed a mutual day of woe.

One told of missing or broken tools and no direction from those in charge. Others felt the physical pain of doing agonizing demolition work on a project site still teeming with water from the storm.

A graphic with a light blue background. On the left, there is text: "THE PROBLEMS IN THE NEW ORLEANS AREA ARE SOLVABLE. PLEASE BE PART OF THE SOLUTION." followed by "TEXT N-O-L-A TO 50555 AND DONATE \$5 TO ST. BERNARD PROJECT" and "WITH THIS MONEY, WE CAN HELP BRING MORE FAMILIES HOME." On the right, there is a logo for the "nola" campaign, which includes a stylized house icon and the text "st. bernard project" below it.

Tears of frustration flowed from not being able to accomplish what they had hoped. More tears of anguish were shed for the onlooking residents of the 9th Ward who lavished both gratitude and heart wrenching remembrances of friends and family lost five years ago.

The second day of work was suspended for an hour at lunchtime in order to attend one of many welcome home parties thrown by the St. Bernard Project whenever their families were able to officially move back into their rebuilt homes. This party was for Mr. Mendoza, who had lived for

five years in a FEMA trailer, parked in the driveway of what used to be his lifelong family home.



**Mr. Mendoza's Homecoming:** His rebuilt home; Mr. Mendoza holding his dog at the ceremony; Invitation to ceremony

After speeches, official ribbon cutting and television news camera crew interviews, the guests were ushered into the newly rebuilt house for a tour and snacks. Witnessing Mr. Mendoza clutching his beloved dog, sheer disbelief dropping in every tear down his smiling cheeks, brought rays of exultation throughout my body. This man never gave up hope and we were able to share that special moment with him.

Subsequent days spent at the Doty house continued to be filled with expert team leadership by Julia and Chase, cooperative rebuilding chores, and lively conversation. The enervating sound of that trusty radio produced smiles all around.

Julia expressed pride in our accomplishments by announcing that we would be the last St. Bernard Project volunteer group to work on the rebuilding portion of this home. Only the addition of kitchen appliances, carpeting and other specialized final touches remained.



*The Doty Family home group taking a break on the last day.*

The other groups continued to spend days wracked with intense labor and firsthand suffering. Initially I felt isolated from them, a self-inflicted instance of survivor guilt. When others spoke of having a sense of walking a path of suffering like Jesus did, I had twinges of being the outsider. I soon came to realize that comparing such experiences was as futile as gauging love for our children: each is a unique, yet valuable addition to the loving family.



The last day in the Doty house brought finishing touches, a group photo and a call from an angel. Our group leader, Pastor Reed Baer, was the first to hear the jingling of the angel's wings in the distance, followed by Chase. Both men looked at each other and instantly knew it was time to go for it.

Off through the newly painted front door they dashed, continuing down the street at an impressive clip. The jingling grew louder until it came to a halt a few houses down from Doty's. It was there Reed bought a round of ice cream "on the house" from the neighborhood ice cream truck. Children from the block soon appeared with money in hand, helping to rebuild NOLA in a most delicious way.



*Pastor Reed Baer ordering ice cream "on the house" for all.*

I expected to bear witness to the pain and suffering of NOLA brought on by Hurricane Katrina five years ago. Instead, I returned to tell firsthand of the ostensibly insurmountable progress that has been made, and of the vital accomplishments by a remarkable group of many, whose achievements tend to garner less attention than the work that remains to be done. The media reports often take the glass half-empty approach, but I bore witness to the glass three quarters full.

Cheers, NOLA!

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