



Shelter from the Storm

Seminarians Offer Hope and Help in Mississippi

by Heather Roote Faller

“Where the rubber meets the road” is a phrase that no longer applies along much of the Gulf Coast,

where few cars inch down the debris-lined streets, stoplights still aren't working, and street signs are makeshift plastic tags with sticky-note letters. But two groups of Princeton Seminary students put their faith into action in January when they traveled to Mississippi to work with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA). They came back with powerful testimony to God's work on the Gulf Coast.

One group formed through the Office of Students Affairs, as director of student relations and senior placement Cathy Cook Davis connected interested students and helped them to plan a relief trip. The students raised their own funds through a letter-writing campaign, donations from their home churches, professors, and other seminarians, and proceeds from the annual Alternative Christmas Gift Fair sponsored by the campus group Seminarians for Peace and Justice and the annual Rat Dance (see sidebar on page 18).

This group of 13 students was based in Gautier, Mississippi, helping people gather their belongings, hauling debris, and hanging drywall. It included two international students, special student Christiane Trefz from Tübingen, Germany, and Temsuwati, a Th.M. student from India, who reflects on his experience on the following pages.

The second group formed around a class taught by associate professor of Old Testament Chip Dobbs-Allsopp. As part of his class on biblical interpretation in a post-modern world, Dobbs-Allsopp encouraged students to propose a final project that would apply concepts studied in the class, such as Emmanuel Levinas's idea of being for the Other. Several students suggested a hurricane relief effort, which Dobbs-Allsopp supported, along with Cook Davis, who went with them on their trip. This group raised funds through a letter-writing campaign, a jazz benefit concert, and a silent auction.

The 11 students worked in and around Gulfport, Mississippi. Their main tasks were “mucking out” (removing debris and mold from homes), and hauling away fallen trees. They participated in the upkeep of their PDA Volunteer Village, a campsite of tents surrounding a church. They took over cooking duties for their last few days, and built platforms to keep the tents out of the mud. They also volunteered to lead devotions for the camp each night. M.Div. senior Camille Cook also shares her reflections on the following pages.

Both trips were student-led and student-organized. “Cathy [Cook Davis] and I both came away impressed with the students,” said Dobbs-Allsopp, “and thankful for the privilege of being allowed to witness their leadership. We saw them take control in ways we don't get to observe in the classroom. That they did this work in the context of a class was phenomenal, because they took ownership of their education. I'm proud of them.”

Restoring hope was as important as restoring houses. “There was pastoral care going on,” said M.Div. senior Katie Walsh. And hope flowed in both directions. Several

students remember a retired Italian boxer whose belongings they tried to rescue from the attic of his ruined house. “With every photo, ribbon, and trophy, he told a story,” they said. Other students remember a small boy dancing in his front yard as his father sang a song about how God would see the people of the Gulf Coast through the storm.

Those who've returned from the Gulf Coast have been changed by these encounters. They see themselves as witnesses, and they want to share what they've seen and heard. “I'm hoping we can go back to those churches that supported our trip,” said Cook Davis, “and tell them the stories. We met people whose lives were changed, and we were privileged to be involved in that.” The students shared their experiences in a presentation to the PTS community in February, including an original song about the experience composed by M.Div. middler Neah Lee and a slide show of images from the trip put together by Walsh (available on the PTS web site).

Many students emphasized that much of the relief and rebuilding work is being done by churches, and churches need to continue their efforts. “People feel abandoned by the government and the media,” said Walsh. “We didn't see FEMA people. We saw churches, lots of churches.” And the need is great. “The destruction was overwhelming. It looked like it just happened days ago, not six months ago,” said Trefz.

Cook Davis is helping to set up several yearlong and summer field education placements through PDA, and another trip is planned for September. “Since we are now so intimately connected,” said Cook Davis, “we must not forget what we've seen, and we need to pledge ourselves to the work ahead.” ■

Learning from Disaster Reflections on Katrina

by Temsuwati

Because of the tsunami that affected Southeast Asia, particularly India, my country, I was especially challenged to take action in response to a natural disaster—in this case Hurricane Katrina. When we reached our destination, the extent of the damage shocked me as I realized that what I saw in the media was only part of the devastation. Far beyond what I had imagined, we saw places utterly devastated and laying desolate. It was not easy to look on the scene. Later, as I listened to the tormented voices describing how people had died in the wake of Katrina and as I gazed at the broken houses, ships, cars, and empty sites once filled with beautiful homes and thronging with people, questions preoccupied my mind: Why Hurricane Katrina? Where was God in it? Why this much suffering? I could not answer myself, for to try to comprehend this situation would be almost as impossible as to try to understand God fully.

My people, the Ao-Naga, have a tribal proverb that says, “Facing a disaster is like

meeting a good teacher.” The understanding of our people is that through disasters people learn so many things, and thus disasters bring about changes for the better. Most people believe that the true qualities of human beings are nurtured through adversity. The circumstances of human pain and suffering are often compared to examples of natural elements that need to be crushed or put through the fire to bring out their essential value: flowers and healing herbs that give out their aroma only when crushed, metals like gold that need to go through the fire to become precious, and carbon that under heavy pressure turns into beautiful diamonds.

Another view of suffering is seen in those who have a deep compassion for the weak and marginalized, but who do not see God working in and through the suffering. When they see the pain in the world, they cannot believe that there is a God who is a loving creator of all. Although their work with the needy is

admirable and important, such people cannot accept that a God who is Love could allow the existence of such misery for humankind.

Suffering can deeply affect people in different ways, either positively as in the former attitude, or negatively as in the latter. It can be a source of both inspiration and depression.

Through this mission trip, I affirmed for myself that when people are faced with disasters and suffering, how they respond affects whether suffering becomes a source of inspiration or of depression. Some will see it as a curse; some will accept it as a challenge to become stronger. Some will see it as retribution for sins—sometimes it may be and

(continued on page 18)



Photo: Frances Wattman

PTS students in a PDA supply tent in Gautier, Mississippi

From Classroom to Construction Zone Biblical Interpretation in a Post-Katrina World

by Camille Cook

“New Jersey!!! How did you get here from New Jersey?” It was a question posed to our group time and time again by the people of the Gulf Coast. It was a question that we often answered inarticulately: we are a class, we are seminary students, and we are working with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

But it was more than just curious Mississippians who pondered this question. We asked ourselves throughout the week, how did we get here? As a group of 11 students, one professor, and one administrator, we joked about lacking practical skill sets and having callous-free hands more used to typing than hammering. We could all lead morning devotions, but who could run a

chain saw? We could exegete biblical texts, but who could remove tile from a kitchen? But as the week progressed, purpose and energy replaced our skepticism and hesitations. Our “Biblical Interpretation in a Post-Modern World” class was quickly renamed “Biblical Interpretation in a Post-Katrina World.” The week would inevitably give us a new lens through which to view our biblical and theological texts.

During our week on the Gulf Coast, the faces, names, and stories of real people merged with ideas and ideals studied in the classroom. The readings of our course



Photo: Camille Cook

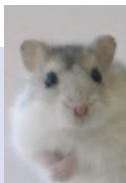
PTS students with Professor Chip Dobbs-Allsopp, Cathy Cook Davis, and Jackie, a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance camp manager

became palpable as we shook hands with the voiceless, the powerless, and the marginalized. Papers we had written were illumined as we sat down for meals with people who taught us about hospitality, generosity, and compassion. Our struggles with social issues

(continued on page 18)

Rat Raises Revenue for Hurricane Relief

by Meagan Cracraft



A long time ago, there was a rat problem in Hodge Hall. In frustration, residents took matters into their own hands, eradicated the rats, and then threw a party to celebrate. Or maybe it was the noise from the party that scared the rats away. The story has changed over the years, but the tradition has remained the same: each fall, the residents of Hodge Hall throw the Rat Dance.

The party is planned in secret, and seminarians who live on campus anxiously await word that the women of Hodge Hall are beginning to paint. Each year the women choose the theme (always including a rat and the words “illegitimi non carborundum”), paint the floor at the bottom of the spiral staircase, and determine the charity to which party admission money will be given, while the men of the dormitory plan the other details of the party.

After reflecting on the natural disasters of the last year, the women chose “The Calming of the Storm” for their theme. The result? A painting of a hurricane with a large dove hovering over it, a great party, and \$275 given to help fellow PTS students travel to Mississippi to spend a week helping clean up the results of Hurricane Katrina. The residents of Hodge Hall were proud to use an event that resulted from one small misfortune—rats in the dorm—to assist others who suffered a much larger misfortune. ■

Meagan Cracraft is an M.Div. junior from Coffeyville, Kansas.

sometimes not. Suffering can make us or break us. I was blessed very much to hear from some of the people affected by Katrina how they came closer to God through the disaster. One woman even said it was a blessing in disguise for her.

Now the sea is so silent, as if it has not done anything. But it is a deceptive calm; we never know when it will rage again. Many people have died, and huge destruction has taken place. I was told that even in 10 years it will not be possible to get back to where these people and these communities were

and biblical narratives merged into tangible realities as we sifted through the rubble of personal tragedies and human narratives.

The pragmatic application of our theological education was given a new meaning as we ripped nails out of floorboards alongside our classmates and professor.

The semester’s class had ended, but the precept continued as we walked the streets of Mississippi. We learned that the faces and places would not allow the passive disengagement of the theological inquiries of the classroom; logic-driven answers can sound heartless to living bodies, which require consideration and attention on a different level. In our short week we were bound inextricably to the reality of their suffering, loss, sorrow, confusion, fear, hope, and faith: our semester of academic casuistry was at times confirmed and at others dispelled.

Although not all of us could tile roofs or hang drywall, each of us found that we represented something more than our construction skills. The people whose homes, families, and spirits were washed away in the hurricane need to see messages of solidarity, hope, and promise. The victims need to be reminded that throughout their varied experiences in these coming months, God is steadfast. God is fully present in the Gulf

before the storm. However, I would say, blessed is the person and nation who can find the rainbow after the storm. In the midst of the chaos of destruction and loss, despair and suffering, we pray that the eternal flame of hope will burn bright to restore the land and the people to the greater glory of God. ■

Temsuwati is a Th.M. student and associate pastor at Mokokchung Town Baptist Church in Nagaland, India.

Coast communities, and yet God chooses to be present through agents and means—even agents and means as mixed-up and inadequate as a group of seminarians from Princeton.

Regardless of how far we traveled from the coast, we found seashells carried in by the storm. In places where water seemed an impossible reality, the seashells proved its past presence. Similarly, regardless of how great the destruction, how dismal the outlook, we found glimmers of hope, shreds of light, and whispers of growth. The water had receded, but the shells remained. The damage was done, but it was not the final word for the Gulf Coast.

We worked for one week to raise the fallen—whether fallen trees or fallen dreams. We worked for one week to lift the broken—whether broken roofs or broken spirits. We worked for one week, and though our efforts were small, the impact on our lives and ministries was consequential. “The other” is now the face of an Italian boxer as he sorts his belongings, “the marginal” is now a ghost town of broken windows, and “the devastation” is now a soggy page of a photo album. As a group of seminary students, we feel called to walk alongside the people of God as they experience exhilaration and alienation, devastation and triumph. As they experience God as both immanent and transcendent, we want to remind them of God’s promises and faithfulness. As one senior student commented, “As we speed away from seminary, this is one class we are not soon to forget.” ■

Camille Cook is an M.Div. senior from Mahomedi, Minnesota.



Photo: Rebecca Montgomery

This year’s hurricane-shaped painting of the Ratus discreetly depicts the rats as the leaves in the olive branch.