

Students

Help Dig Out from Katrina

BY CLAYTON SOLOMON

When Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, it was just my second week as a law student. Soon, a lively debate stirred on campus about the government's response, and the underlying issues of race and class. But New Orleans seemed far away—while fall exams seemed around the corner.

By the second semester, I had my feet on the ground, so, motivated by the recurring images of displaced victims, I decided to spend my spring break in New Orleans. After sharing my plans with a few other students, it became clear that I wasn't the only one who would rather soak up sun there, instead of in South Beach.

Before long, twenty-one law students committed to the trip. What started out as a discussion among friends turned out to be an extraordinary project that reflected Maryland Law's commitment to public service, and the unique character of our faculty and student body.

We arrived in New Orleans on Sunday, March 19. After lunch in the French Quarter, we headed to "Camp Premier," a FEMA-operated, military-style facility

for relief workers and volunteers; we were assigned two tents.

The next morning, we hit the road at 8 a.m. Our group divided into two teams, each assigned by Catholic Charities of New Orleans to a different home in St. Bernard Parish, one of the hardest hit areas. Both teams were given a set of tools and simple instructions: "Everything must go—the furniture, clothes, appliances, cabinets, drywall—everything."

Words can hardly describe what the homes looked like when we first entered. Soiled furniture and personal items were scattered across the floor, layered with dry mud. Ceiling tiles were stained because water levels had reached the attic. Nothing was salvageable. By lunch, we had removed all the personal items, and had begun pulling up carpet and knocking out drywall. At the end of the day, we all felt exhausted.

That evening, Catholic Charities gave the group a tour of the lower Ninth Ward. To our surprise, the devastated community looked much as it did in September. Piles of rubble were still stacked ten- to fifteen-feet high on every block, and over-

turned cars and boats were still scattered throughout the landscape. Cement foundations were all that remained of a once vibrant neighborhood.

The next morning, we picked up where we left off and removed walls, fixtures, and ceiling panels. My group spent most of the day removing stubborn knotty pine wall and floor panels. At night, we enjoyed dinner downtown and conversed, for the first time in a long time, on a subject other than law school, and explored the French Quarter before rushing back to Camp Premier ahead of the midnight lockout.

We wrapped up our work by noon on the fourth day. All in all, we completed work on two-and-a-half homes, and made a \$1,300 donation to Catholic Charities' "Helping Hands" project.

The New Orleans trip was a turning point in my law school career. Although I was initially hesitant about organizing such a large project mid-semester, I found the time spent to be a much-needed break from the daily routine. Moreover, doing non-legal work during the break only solidified my commitment to the study of law. In just a few days, with only a handful of household tools, our group was able to make a significant impact in the lives of several families. Yet, sometime soon, these families will return home to a myriad of legal problems. Equipped with knowledge acquired at Maryland Law, it is my hope that several students, including myself, will be there to assist them.

A native of Miami, Fla., Clayton Solomon ('08) returned to Louisiana last summer, where he worked as a legal intern for New Orleans Legal Assistance in the predatory lending division.



Clayton Solomon ('08), back row center, along with the spring breakers working on Katrina restoration.