Still Down in the Delta

SOMEWHERE in Biloxi, Mississippi, there is a lady with a cane, shuffling across an uneven, unsafe floor, still damaged by Hurricane Katrina. She barely has a working kitchen and one of her windows is broken, with a box covering the gaping hole—the only affordable fix. She received a grant from HUD to rebuild, but the contractor hired for repairs stole the money and never came back, leaving her alone in her struggle to recover and to wonder when she will wake up from a nightmare that started eight years ago.

Maryland Carey Service Corps (MCSC) was founded in 2005 as the Maryland Carey Law Katrina Project. It sent a small but dedicated group of students south to help serve those ravaged by one of the largest hurricanes ever to hit the Gulf region. Eight years later, UM Carey Law students are still working to relieve the legal woes of Hurricane Katrina and, along the way, discovering the plight of a people whose struggles have lasted almost a decade.

“You would see houses that were clearly condemned, but there is a trailer in the back and that is where the family is still living because they don’t have a HUD grant to rebuild their main home,” recalls Helen Wolf, co-president of MCSC, about her first trip to the region. “That is what hit me the most, is that these people have been living this way since 2005 and a lot of them are uneducated, a lot of them are poor, and a lot of them don’t know how to access help.”

Even today the struggle to recover continues. The MCSC’s largest project is the annual winter break trips, during which participants provide free legal work for the poor and underrepresented in needy communities throughout the Gulf. The past year’s trip provided much needed civil, criminal, and rebuilding services to the communities of Slidell, La.; New Orleans, La.; Biloxi, Miss.; and Jackson, Miss.

MCSC’s mission has been a steadfast dedication to fostering an ethic of public service in UM Carey Law students through local service, fundraising, and travel placements at nonprofit and government organizations throughout the country.

“When people get back from our trips, they don’t say, ‘I used tort law that I learned while I was down there,’” says Andrew Kraus, MCSC’s other 2012-2013 co-president. “Instead, the one-on-one interaction people get makes them realize that the education they get in law school really can impact people’s lives.”

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Participating students also volunteer within the Baltimore community. This past spring, for instance, they helped to clean up Fort McHenry in conjunction with the Environmental Law Service.

Today, the organization, one of the largest programs of its kind, has provided more than 14,000 hours of service as nearly 100 students annually give their time and expertise to communities across the country. MCSC was founded as an immediate response to Hurricane Katrina, with no real plans for its future. But good things have a way of sticking around.