



From the Ashes of Katrina

BY SISTER JOYCE MARIE HANKS, MSC

When the Marianites of Holy Cross returned to New Orleans after months of evacuation due to Hurricane Katrina, everything was gray and lifeless, like ashes. Death and dying were everywhere.

As we picked up the pieces of our own lives and tried to restore what we could of our own property, we were aware of the many people who were struggling to restore normalcy to their lives and make ends meet. As an initial response, we established a fund to help others with rent, utility bills, medicine and other necessities. But we knew these were only temporary aids. Last year, an opportunity appeared for us to do something much more lasting.

Marianite Sister Beth Mouch, director of St. Jude Community Center, put us in touch with Father Ed Brienz, a priest from the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio. In the years since Katrina, Father Ed has coordinated volunteers from Youngstown on numerous rebuilding projects in the New Orleans area. This time he was looking for a project that volunteers could work on from start to finish. His diocese would provide the labor and a contractor, but they needed someone who could provide the house, the tools, materials and other necessities. And he wanted to work with a family he could get to know.



TOP LEFT: Sisters Joyce M. Hanks and Beth Mouch review the rehab supply list.

ABOVE: Lisa with the first crew from Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio who prepared the house for rehab.



The kitchen before



The kitchen after

Lisa sheds tears at the blessing of her family's new home.
Photo by Peter Finney Jr. The Clarion Herald, September 12, 2009. Used with permission.



We immediately thought of Lisa Everage, who had worked for us as a housekeeper for many years. Lisa and her family had been evacuated by the National Guard following Katrina and eventually found themselves in Texas with little more than the clothes on their backs. They were environmental refugees. The disaster had not only devastated their home; it had turned their entire lives upside down.

It wasn't until 2008 that Lisa and her family were able to return to New Orleans to try to begin again. Lisa resumed her housekeeping work with us, and was able to rent an apartment and get the children in school again, but she often shared with us how difficult it was to start over.

That's when we approached her with a proposal: "Lisa, instead of paying rent every month, why not put the money toward owning a home of your own?" We explained that the Marianites could buy a home damaged by the hurricane that would then be rehabilitated by the Youngstown volunteers.

St. Jude Community Center would provide the tools and housing for the volunteers, and we would provide an interest-free loan to take care of the rest.

Delighted, she agreed and the plan went into action. We Marianites purchased one of the gutted houses not far from our Holy Angels Complex, supplied the materials, and took care of the legal work. St. Jude Community Center bought the tools and housed the 250 volunteers who came in rotating platoons under the direction of contractor John Pitzulo. Within six weeks the house was completely restored, using environmentally friendly materials and Energy Star products.

At the house blessing, Lisa managed only a couple of words before being overcome by tears: "This means a whole lot...it's a dream come true for me. Now I have something I can pass on to my kids."

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