

Loyola students clean up New Orleans

While loads of college kids headed to Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., for the typical “let’s party” spring break, 66 Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, students opted to travel to New Orleans to perform a selfless ministry.

Spring Break Outreach, part of Loyola’s Center for Community Service and Justice, coordinated student-led groups to assist with disaster relief work in New Orleans and Violet, La., and Metairie, Miss., in the almost two-year aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

“It’s still a mess,” said Christina Harrison, assistant director of Loyola’s Immersion Programs and Outreach. “There are significant portions of New Orleans that haven’t been touched; (hundreds of) houses that haven’t been gutted” or bulldozed. One noticeable improvement from last year, she said, is the cleared trash and debris.

The first day on the post for sophomore Lisa Pitale included building a new house through Habitat for Humanity; she handled insulation, priming and installing a porch floor. Day two she was perched on top of an old house building a new roof; later she cleaned up a park that will be transformed into a playground. Besides construction duties, the rest of the weeklong ministry placed Ms. Pitale in elementary school classrooms assisting with special education, art and physical education.

The 20-year-old felt this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that she needed to take. “This trip changed my outlook on the definition of society, in particular how a community interacts and lives together,” said Ms. Pitale. “I especially was impacted by the effects a natural disaster can have on an entire city, including how every aspect – education, jobs, health, transportation – can be destroyed and the struggles a city goes through in its rebuilding efforts.”

It is important for students to realize in such a disaster, damage is not only physical but psychological as well, said Ms. Harrison.

“People are discouraged, disheartened and traumatized. The students really understood the importance of being present to the people – talking, hearing their stories, laughing and bringing companionship. That process was reciprocal because our students learned so much through these interactions.”

Following the outreach ministry, Loyola students and staff attended the Ignatian Solidarity Conference March 9-12 in New Orleans.

Lisa Pitale is coordinating a book and toy drive for New Orleans schools. For more information, e-mail Lisa at lapitale@loyola.edu.