



Photo: Mary Pat White, RSCJ

Jovel Queirolo, a junior at Schools of the Sacred Heart, San Francisco, hugs Mary Bernstein, RSCJ, at Duchesne House. Muriel Cameron, RSCJ, in the background, says goodbye to students at the end of their service trip.

OPENED EYES AND HEARTS IN NEW ORLEANS

Where Rebirth Comes Slowly, But Hope Floats Spirits Like Riffs from an Alto Sax



Mary Pat White, RSCJ, meets and shares a laugh with Kevin Fitzpatrick, volunteer housing coordinator for Catholic Charities' Operation Helping Hands in New Orleans.

A banner hangs above the porch of a late nineteenth century former rectory in New Orleans recently recast as a haven for volunteers still coming to this area in a time locals call “post-Katrina.” The banner holds the words “Louisiana: Recover, Rebuild, REBIRTH” around a fleur-de-lis, symbol of the Crescent City.

Signs of rebirth, the operative word on the banner, can be seen almost everywhere here, and the house on Bayou Road, operated by the Society of the Sacred Heart, is one of them. The former rectory, which had been vacant, was reborn last year as “Duchesne House” and stands as a symbol of the RSCJ response to a recovery effort still unfolding two-and-a-half years after Hurricane Katrina combined with a failed levy system to wreak death and devastation.

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A joyous song: choir leads congregation at St. Augustine Catholic Church, New Orleans.

The RSCJ were instantly drawn to the mushrooming needs of New Orleans, their charism matched to many aspects of it.

“Working with the youth who were flooding our city naturally fit our educational charism and commitment to solidarity with those suffering,” said Muriel Cameron, RSCJ, a member of the Duchesne House community along with three other RSCJ.

Some of those youth came to Duchesne House from Schools of the Sacred Heart in San Francisco, who were there February 16-19, on a service trip.

“We are truly blessed with a new understanding of the desperate situation in New Orleans. As Californians, there is no understanding of the situation until you see the truth of the poverty in our nation. It’s all interconnected,” Jovel Queirolo, a junior at the school, wrote in a log the students kept on-line to share their experiences with classmates back home.

Other students had similar comments, many of them sobering. A common theme was their view of a chronic lack of federal government support for the recovery of New Orleans. “My experience here has opened my eyes to the deception of our established government,” one student wrote.

The students spent the four days engaged in various types of renovation work, including preparing a house for painting and doing landscaping. Each night after supper a guest speaker from the local community addressed the students.

The first group activity for the eleven high school juniors and four chaperones was Mass at St. Augustine, which serves an African American congregation in New Orleans. It was a unique experience for most of the students, particularly impressed

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by the rousing, robed choir at the altar fronted by an alto sax player who put jazz-like melody lines on traditional Catholic hymns.

“We were feeling the love, getting tossed around in all the craziness,” said Jovel, referring to the animated “sign of peace” at the Mass.

MORE THAN A HOUSE

Duchesne House offers far more than room and board for volunteers who stay here. There is group prayer, topical and faith discussions, a sense of the interconnectedness of people and the role of faith in service to those in need.

“I have visited several Network schools and they all made me feel so much at home, very welcoming. It was the same thing at Duchesne House. I love the hospitality. Everyone automatically takes us in. I love the community spirit,” Jovel said.

The four RSCJ connected to the house bring a diversity of backgrounds and capabilities that seem tailored to the situation. Mary Pat White, RSCJ, spent a career in campus ministry that gives her an ease in working with young adults. Marie-Louise “ML” Wolfington, RSCJ, works with volunteers in clean-up efforts and is the neighborhood connector for the house, walking up and down Bayou Road, known to all. Mary Bernstein, RSCJ, a community organizer, puts the group in touch with significant inner dynamics of city politics and decisions from a grass roots level that cuts across racial, religious and economic lines. Muriel Cameron, RSCJ, an educator at the local Sacred Heart school, “The Rosary,” is a hurricane veteran with the longest tenure in the region among the group.

“I feel that because among the four of us we have so many different as well as similar publics with whom we interact, we can offer a particular richness of reflection to the students who come here,” Sister Cameron said.

Doug Greer, one of the volunteers from Schools of the Sacred Heart in San Francisco, responds to one of his peers during some down time at Duchesne House, where the volunteers stayed during their service trip.



In an example of Christ's call to "Come follow Me," the four of them came together about a year ago from different regions to answer the call to serve the spiritual and social needs of the hurricane victims.

"I was in Boston, at a new community. Muriel Cameron was pleading for help, saying we need a volunteer house in New Orleans. I had two new knees—a new lease on life.

I said, 'I can do this,'" Sister Wolfington recalled. Within a year, she said, the four were in place on Bayou Road.

"We definitely are four strong-minded women," she said, continuing, "We are four legs on a table that is a program that is still growing." she said.

She said the group felt very fortunate to find the spacious rectory that became Duchesne House, mothballed earlier by the Archdiocese of New Orleans, which gladly donated it to the Society under a one dollar per year plus utilities leasing arrangement.

The RSCJ presence is broad and deep in New Orleans, and includes: Academy of the Sacred Heart "The Rosary" high school; Duchesne House; Sophie Barat House, a community and spiritual center; and Carondelet, a community residence next to The Rosary. The Society first came to the region in 1821, establishing a community and school at Grand Coteau, about 150 miles northwest of New Orleans, according to Mary Blish, RSCJ, unofficial historian and part of the Sophie Barat House community.



Mary Blish, RSCJ

Sister Blish said the Society's flexibility that allowed the New Orleans team to coalesce is a living example of the vision of the Society's founding.

She said the four RSCJ at Duchesne House form a unique team and "these people are very good at what they do," adding that they also have the natural inclination to collaborate with other groups, including those within the Society.

"There are natural collaborations between various alumnae/i groups, Children of Mary Sodalitys, individual alumnae," she said.

The students from San Francisco and their classmates will form another lifelong group in the Society's family; and from their comments about their service trip, it appears the Society

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Photo: Jerry Naunheim, Jr.

The "four M's" who form the Duchesne House community. Left to right: Marie-Louise Wolfington, RSCJ, Mary Pat White, RSCJ, Mary Bernstein, RSCJ, and Muriel Cameron, RSCJ.

has a core group of young adults who will both live and foster the charism of making God's love visible in the heart of the world.

"It will be hard to erase from our minds or forget what we saw in the Ninth Ward. This will influence my community service in the future," Doug Greer said. Jovel said that her experience at Duchesne House and New Orleans has given her an invaluable lesson on community.

"We have learned what community is and how to build it ourselves. This is how we learn to do community service, by experiencing community ourselves in this way," she said. Many more will serve New Orleans through Duchesne House. The next group, which arrived in late March after Easter, came from the Newman Center community at California Poly Tech in San Luis Obispo.

Sister Cameron says the Duchesne House experiences are enriching both the volunteers and their hosts.

"I think it is an experience that has been very mutually energizing," she said, with both groups experiencing "a deep spirit of peace in the midst of chaos and darkness, a place where they can feel at home with themselves and ask questions about life."

"A wonderful dimension of this ministry," she said, "is that so many threads of our relationships have come together."

She talked about the "amazing things" that can happen through the interconnections of people and groups. "It helps us to grow more fully in some dimension; to be whomever God is calling us to be." ✦