

REBUILDING THE BAY

770.28 MILES



LINDSAY HEGE | Photographer

Steve Earley, '04, carts debris from a homeowner's backyard. Four students, five alumni, five staff members and one faculty member participated in the Memorial Day weekend service trip.

ELON CONTINUES ITS COMMITMENT TO MISSISSIPPI'S GULF COAST

This package was written and photographed by participants of the Kernodle Center for Service Learning's May 23-27 Hurricane Katrina relief trip to Bay St. Louis, Miss., one of more than a dozen such trips the center has sponsored since the Aug. 2005 storm. For information about future trips to Bay St. Louis, call the center at ext. 7250.

Steve Earley '04 Elon Graduate

Southern Mississippi's full recovery from Hurricane Katrina will be measured in decades. How many is the only question. Yet, not quite three years after the storm, residents fear the rest of the country has moved on.

"Other people think that it's time that this should be over, that it should be back to normal by now," says Cindy Lederer, who has worked as a volunteer coordinator for the past two years even though she lost her own home in the Aug. 2005 storm. "It's not in the news anymore, it's not a big headline ... so I think that some people just feel it's complete. That's the American way to think, that things get fixed very quick."

What a lift Lederer got, then, when she met people who so clearly haven't forgotten. Lederer, 58, of Waveland, Miss., is one of dozens of Katrina survivors volunteers from Elon have assisted over the course of 13 service trips, the most recent of which was held Memorial Day weekend.

"It's been a real commitment by [Elon]," Lederer said. "It's been really touching to see."

Just over a month after Katrina, Elon adopted Bay St. Louis, Miss., an 8,000-person city about an hour northeast of New Orleans which sustained 120-mph winds and a 30-foot storm surge at the height of the hurricane. Elon groups have focused their relief efforts in the city, colloquially known as the Bay, but have worked across Hancock County, of which Bay St. Louis is the seat.

Trip participants, comprising students, faculty, staff, and for the first time on last month's trip, alumni, almost to a person, return energized by the connection they've made with the community and the direct hand they had in progress, organizers say.

"Two years ago, it was this war zone. People had never seen a community that's looked like that," said Brian O'Shea, Assistant to the Vice President for Student Life and past trip participant. "Now people see people moving into houses."

Elon volunteers have delivered supplies, organized donations, cleared debris, painted and built houses, among other tasks. On the inaugural trip in Oct. 2005, participants even helped set up a wedding.

"It's very rewarding," said Josh Tate '10, one of two student leaders on May's trip, his third to Bay St. Louis. "I know I'm going to be back down there."

Tate and others who have taken part in multiple trips can tell you how far the Bay has come. The bridge that carries Highway 90 over St. Louis Bay - a vital link to the city of Gulfport, a major employment center - reopened a year ago. A new visitor's center was scheduled to open this month. New homes are springing up everywhere.

But, repeat volunteers can also tell you how far the area still has left to go. With almost two-thirds of Hancock County's 19,000 homes damaged or destroyed by Katrina, hundreds of residents remain in government trailers. Even some churches and local government agencies are still in temporary structures.

Thankfully, in part because of the richness of attendees' experiences, Elon plans to continue its service trips indefinitely.

"We thought we would do it for two years and now we're at three," O'Shea said. "At this point, we'll continue to send trips as long as there's student interest."

This thrills Bay St. Louis resident Kathy McClellan, 54, who has hosted crawfish boils for several Elon groups despite living in government trailers.

"Without volunteer groups, very few people would have had their homes repaired or rebuilt by now," McClellan said, adding that volunteers' emotional support has been as vital as their labor.

"Too many others don't want to hear our stories. ... Listening to our stories without making judgments about us helps to validate our feeling about what has and is happening here."



LINDSAY HEGE | Photographer



RAQUEL CORTES MAZUELAS | Photographer

Ashley Kehrer, '02, paints the inside of a new home May 25.

Surrounded by bare foundations and temporary structures, Miss., church parish's sign advertises hope.