



By [MAGGIE HEYN RICHARDSON](#)

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All of a sudden, they're in formation. Twenty-somethings in regulation khakis, t-shirts and Timberland boots line up on the North Boulevard median for a highly charged exercise routine they call a "unity rally."

At 8:30 a.m., four leaders leap to an elevated portion of the plaza and kick things off.

Three neat rows are moving in time, rhythmically belting out, "Spirit! Discipline! Purpose! Pride!" This is no ordinary physical training. It looks part military, part corporate America, part high school dance line.

"Are you ready to do slappy happies?" one leader yells, gyrating.

"City Year's always ready!" comes the group's purposeful retort.

Then, the young men and women plunge into modified lunges, clapping their hands below outstretched khaki-clad knees.

Over-the-top idealism defines City Year. It was founded in Boston in 1988 by four friends (then in their 20s) who believed young people from disparate backgrounds could change the world by volunteering side-by-side in communities.

This is an organization that plays the speeches of John F. Kennedy to callers placed on hold and whose morning meetings start with platitudes like, "Challenge cynicism wherever you find it."

Since it began, more than 9,000 young people have served in one of City Year's 17 sites in the U.S. and South Africa. Louisiana's program, developed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, is the newest.

"Ordinarily," says City Year Co-Founder and President Michael Brown, "it takes two years to open a new site, but this was done—remarkably—in 90 days."

By January 2006, 51 young people who watched Katrina's aftermath unfold on television, had signed on for City Year Louisiana's inaugural class. Most were from outside of the state.

Another manic Monday

After the unity rally concludes, corps members board vans for East Baton Rouge Parish schools. Their role is to assist teachers, mentor children and coordinate afterschool programs.

They also conduct evening recreational activities for young people at Renaissance Village, the FEMA trailer park in Baker. On weekends, they travel to storm-torn areas where they gut houses, repaint and construct playgrounds. Because of the devastation in the state, says Co-Executive Director Chris Flood, "These guys work harder than any other site across the country."

Tall, thin and mild-mannered, Chad Higginbotham was taking a break from college and waiting tables in Indianapolis when he signed up to serve nearly a year ago. "It was something different," he says.

Higginbotham, 20, says the 60-hour work weeks "are insane," but he's gotten used to it. He's also adjusted to the unity rally. "It was a little>> confusing at first, a little corny," he says. "But now I like it."

Higginbotham and six teammates are dropped off at Highland Elementary School, where he heads for teacher Brittany Blake's fourth grade class. Boys seated near the door see him and whisper, "Hey, Mr. Chad!" Like many corps members, he had little experience with young people, particularly those living in extreme poverty. He's seen fights among the children, at least one knife taken away and a few students expelled. Nevertheless, he's adjusted.

"The hardest thing is discipline," he says. "But I'm growing into it."

Across town, at Capitol Middle School, a handful of girls light up when Shreveport native Andrea Shyne, 23, walks down the hall. She learned about City Year while volunteering at a shelter at Bethany World Prayer Center. She joined the program in January after graduating from LSU.

Shyne feels the students at Capitol Middle aren't what people assume. "They just want respect from adults," she says.

Math teacher Erica Meyer starts a mock game of Jeopardy and two teams answer questions about negative integers. Shyne calms a handful of rowdy boys and reminds them of the game's rules.

She watches a boy named Spincer. In frustration, he throws his head down on his desk. Shyne encourages him to get back in the game.

"I love it. I love being at Capitol Middle," she says later. "It's not even anything you do directly. It's just being there for the kids."



Corps leader Megan Kirkpatrick (center) gets a hug from fellow corps members Sherry McMillon (left) and Emily Hagan (right) after receiving special recognition during the graduation ceremony held at the Shaw Center.



Jennifer Alexander leads City Year members in their morning pledge downtown.

Avoiding burnout

In exchange for grueling hours, City Year corps members earn a weekly stipend of \$250. At the end of their term, they're also paid a bonus of around \$5,000 for tuition or student loans. The biggest challenge for the Louisiana corps, says senior corps member James Ward, is exhaustion. "It's hard for them to regenerate," he said.

It's also hard to escape. Not only do most live in the same Government Street apartment complex, they also ride together nearly everywhere. Few corps members have cars, so the organization provides transportation to all service activities. After work, they walk to Albertsons for groceries. If they have money to spare, they eat out at nearby Arzi's or Raising Cane's.

Many have bonded over the intensity of their experience, says Higginbotham, who's become close friends with members of the Highland Elementary team. Others, like two of his roommates, resigned mid-way through because the experience was too intense.

Stay or go?

By summer, Louisiana's first class of corps members had to decide whether to stay or move on.

Aside from sharing a cramped space with three roommates, Shyne had few complaints about her service. "I'm so glad we have the opportunity to be here," she says, while painting wheelchair ramps at a FEMA trailer park off Greenwell Springs Road. She was also pleased with the progress her students had made. Spincer, who'd started off the year poorly, earned two awards when school ended in May, including Most Improved in Science.

But it wasn't enough to keep Shyne in City Year's trenches. "It's time for me to be in the real world," she says. "I want to get a job, hopefully in a nonprofit." She acknowledged the organization exposed her to numerous community organizations.

"It's given me a better way to network," she says.

On the other hand, Higginbotham applied for a coveted senior corps member position. "This time I think I want to serve in New Orleans," he said, "or maybe lead the Highland team in Baton Rouge." After City Year, Higginbotham plans to return to school and change his major from drama to education. He wants to be a teacher.

In May, Higginbotham hovered outside the City Year's recruitment director's office with others vying for the position. "I'm supposed to find out today," he said nervously. A few minutes later, he emerged smiling. This month, City Year Louisiana's second class starts. Higginbotham and 49 other corps members will serve in overcrowded schools in Baton Rouge. Twelve other corps members will head to New Orleans where they'll work in neighborhoods crippled by the storm. Some corps members come from Louisiana, others from around the country. But all are equipped with signature khakis, Timberlands and unbridled idealism.



Chad Higginbotham (center) listens as Bianca Hally (right) reads a worksheet at Highland Elementary.



Corps member Andrea Shyne helps Valecia Williams, 11, build a shaker at a church summer camp in Baker.

Jennifer Eplett Reilly among City Year's co-founders

In 1988, four friends in Boston decided young people just needed opportunities to change communities, so they created City Year.

One of them was Jennifer Eplett Reilly, then a young investment banker now living and working in Baton Rouge. Fellow founder and City Year President Michael Brown says the local philanthropist and social activist was instrumental in launching the new Louisiana site.

It was easy to attract concerned young people to City Year Louisiana, says Eplett Reilly. "They really feel this is a defining moment for their generation, and they didn't want to miss it."

Looking back 18 years, Eplett Reilly says the founders' original goals were threefold: to encourage young people to serve, to make sure those young people were racially diverse and to raise money from the private sector by not just asking for donations, but by encouraging companies to serve alongside corps members. Over the years, City Year has successfully raised millions in cash and goods and has been recognized by CEOs and U.S. presidents for its innovation.

Eplett Reilly says most alumni embark on lifelong activism. "We know from a recent study that they're leading community efforts, running for office, and voting in high numbers," she says.

City Year's founders still hope one day young people will discuss where they plan to serve like they discuss where they're going to college. "This may sound incredibly idealistic," says Eplett Reilly, "but we are incredibly idealistic."