

City Year members to lend hand

Youth pledge to help rebuild hard-hit coast

February 22, 2006
Chante Dionne Warren

Displaced New Orleans resident Aria Mason, 22, can't concentrate on the flood waters that destroyed her family's home and drove her from her community.

Instead, she made an oath Tuesday on the steps of the Capitol with 49 other young community activists from throughout the nation.

They pledged to help other hurricane- ravaged families restore their damaged homes and schools and to mentor and tutor displaced children.

In exchange for their service, City Year members will receive money toward their educations.

"The greatest way I can help the people who helped us is to go back and help others," Mason said.

About 300 people attended the kick-off celebration for members of City Year, a national youth service organization. It is part of the AmeriCorps network in which young adults will provide a year of full-time community service in Baton Rouge, New Orleans and parts of Mississippi affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

City Year has 1,200 members nationwide.

Speakers including Gov. Kathleen Blanco, Rep. Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge, and City Year leaders congratulated corps members for their courage, spirit and discipline.

"This City Year group has accepted a huge challenge. With your help, we're going to turn this tragedy into a brighter future for our families," Blanco said.

A special tribute also was held to honor the memory of City Year Chairman Eli Segal, who died Monday. He helped launch the program's service response to Louisiana and Mississippi after the hurricanes.

Service members started working in January, picking up trash and painting murals, Mason said. Members also built a playground in Waveland, Miss., she said.

"People are excited seeing young people being out there and vibrant," Mason said.

Out-of-state service members toured parts of New Orleans and Mississippi devastated by the storm.

"I feel privileged for what I'm about to do. This is a natural disaster and we need people who care," said Michael Stevens, 22, of Rochester, N.Y.

Kandace Danaby, 20, of West Helena, Ark., agreed.

"We have our work cut out for us, but that only makes us want to do our work better," she said. "We have no time for playing games because these people need us."

City Year members will provide on-site tutoring and mentoring services in Highland and Park elementaries, and Capitol, Glen Oaks, Kenilworth and Scotlandville middle schools. Service members also will hold academic workshops, lead community service projects and help teachers.

City Year members also will serve displaced young people living at Renaissance Village in Baker by developing evening activities for teens and running a teen center.

“We will be out there Mondays through Thursdays for three hours a day, working with teens and doing service projects,” said 29-year-old Andrea Gacs of San Jose, Calif.