

Even if leaders fail, volunteers keep on working

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Lanny Keller

Darkness extends across much of New Orleans today, but there is a psychic grimness about in Louisiana that is far from limited to the storm-ravaged neighborhoods of the city.

In the faces of the young idealists of City Year's service corps, there is an antidote to our fears.

They did not have to come here. The work they do will be arduous. Yet if there is a wonderful consequence of the disasters of 2005, it is that young people across America have shown their elders that the spirit of common humanity lives in a new generation.

One cannot list the thousands of church groups and service organizations who have invested sweat equity in the future of Louisiana.

For City Year Louisiana, it is the second cadre of students and recent graduates 17 to 24 who will work in Baton Rouge and New Orleans for 10 months. Physically difficult sometimes, their work includes wielding hammers and paint brushes to fix homes, schools and parks for children of Louisiana.

But the young volunteers, part of a national unit of the AmeriCorps program, face their hardest labors in classrooms and school yards.

For children too long allowed to fall behind in school, children too long trapped in homes and neighborhoods that leave much to be desired, the idea that they can have a tutor and mentor, older but still young, can be a lifeline amid storms raging long before Katrina.

Many of the City Year volunteers will work at least part of the time in some of the most-challenged schools in East Baton Rouge and Orleans parishes. The School Board in East Baton Rouge is one of the biggest boosters of the program, supported by a who's who of corporate giving and foundation philanthropy.

City Year organized the Louisiana program, one of 16 in the United States, in record time to get a class into the field in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Sworn into the corps Sept. 29 by Mayor-President Kip Holden on the steps of the State Capitol, the 62 volunteers were applauded by political and community leaders. The hurricanes, of course, were not far from anyone's mind.

"This is the defining moment for your generation in America," said Jennifer Eplett Reilly, one of the founders of the City Year national program and board chairwoman of City Year Louisiana.

The corps members obviously feel that way.

Drew Flanders, a recent graduate of the University of Oregon, had been interested in Louisiana since visiting a friend in New Orleans. Back home, he saw what Katrina had done. "That just made my resolve to come here that much stronger," he said.

Flanders will be a team leader in New Orleans, and one of his goals is to try to foster civic engagement and service work among high school students. That team's work is sponsored by the David Toms Foundation.

The idea of civic engagement may seem nebulous in the midst of a city gripped by crisis.

But one of City Year Louisiana goals is to "develop high school students' ability to lead their own service projects," said Hamilton Simon-Jones, the New Orleans site director.

Of course, he said, there is no lack of valuable work to be done, and the people of New Orleans who are back clearly are fired up about rebuilding their city. "Everyone is inspired and looking for ways to participate," Simon-Jones said. "The question is, 'How do I work effectively?'"

City Year Louisiana is highly visible, with its signature red-jacketed corps members working out of an office in downtown Baton Rouge. It is one of the ways that Americans at a grassroots level — unlike, we may feel sometimes, their leaders — demonstrate that the United States has not forgotten Louisiana.

The City Year corps members may not have noticed the inscription above them on the face of the State Capitol. It included a remark from Robert R. Livingston when he signed the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. "We have lived long but this is the noblest work of our whole lives."

Even for young lives, there is noble work to be done in Louisiana this year.

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