

# Mentor organization aims to help Louisiana recover

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The idea that James Ward, a handsome, cosmopolitan 23-year-old from Massachusetts, has been in Baton Rouge for six weeks and hasn't been for sushi at Tsunami seems just plain wrong.

After all, it's just one of several places downtown for the young, hip and upwardly mobile to see and be seen.

But Ward isn't here to be seen, he is here to do.

(Of course, wearing a standard-issue "City Year" shirt, complete with nametag, to his first Shaw Center sushi experience made visibility no problem, either.)

Boston-based City Year, which plans on sending 50 more volunteers to Louisiana in January, was the model for Clinton's AmeriCorps and traditionally fills its ranks with ambitious idealists like Ward, who spend a year "in service," working in what amounts to an urban, domestic Peace Corps (think: Big Brother/Big Sister, only it's a full-time commitment).

Ward is part of an advance team of seven volunteers laying the groundwork for the arrival of the larger group.

Their primary focus is mentoring and tutoring inner city kids. The organization, which was, coincidentally, co-founded by Baton Rouge native Sean Reilly (Lamar Advertising's COO) and his wife, Jennifer Eplett-Reilly, now has 16 branches around the country.

The Louisiana site was being planned even before the hurricanes struck. But after the storms, City Year officials decided to invite experienced veterans of the program, like Ward, back to help out in the disaster zone.

Ward, whose mother is the dean of Wellesley College in the Boston area, admitted he was "raised in a nice house with a good education." But unlike some of his friends, who made an unquestioned leap from college to investment banking, the University of Colorado history major decided he wanted to do more.

"Studying history, I realized that often the catalyst for change is small groups of people," said Ward. "To quote Margaret Meade, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.' "

Following in his older brother's footsteps, Ward put off law school plans and spent a year in the classrooms of Boston's middle schools, serving as a full-time role model for the students he mentored.

In one memorable exercise, which Ward said greatly inspired him, the City Year volunteers asked a class of eighth-graders to sit in silence and think about the one thing they would change about their world. One girl said she didn't understand why their school didn't have more water fountains.

The City Year volunteers showed the student that she could call the water company and press officials there for answers. She did, and then worked with the school and the utility to have more installed.

"It changed her constitution," remembered Ward, who emphatically points out that City Year's volunteer pool is as diverse as the population it serves, both racially and across class lines.

Tapping into that diversity by inviting experienced alumni of the program to Louisiana seemed smart given the scope of the disaster. "Many of them believe this is a defining moment for their generation," said Eplett-Reilly. "This is an American disaster warranting an American response."

Part of that response will involve specialized training. City Year plans to bring mental-health counselors in to prepare volunteers to work with traumatized youth.

Eplett-Reilly said the youth corps received several grants from local benefactors aimed at getting the Louisiana chapter off the ground quickly. Sponsors included the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, Pennington Biomedical Research, Lamar Advertising and CSX Corp.

Corporate sponsorship is, of course, necessary. But, as Ward puts it, so are "boots on the ground."

His were on the grounds of the Renaissance Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer village recently. Ward and two other volunteers, Andrea Gacs, 28, of San Jose, Calif., and Raymond Shanklin, 21, of Seattle, attended a town hall meeting in an open-air tent. Their goal: get the word out to residents of Renaissance that City Year would like some young volunteers from the park to join them.

Before the meeting, Ward introduced himself to anybody that crossed his path. "Hey, bud, what's your name?" he asked one boy, attached to a group of kids mesmerized by an older child's newly donated remote-control car. Another man, engaging Ward in friendly small talk, explained that he "lost everything" to Katrina.

"Lost everything," Ward repeated in sympathetic disbelief.

The chair of the meeting, a wiry African-American man with a preacher's intonation, brought up several issues of concern: the city of Baker refusing to provide fire service without FEMA's subsidy, the allowance of dog's in the park, the fervent hope by park officials that guns will not be fired into the air on New Year's Eve.

Gacs spoke to the group, which consisted of about 15 people, mostly senior citizens. "I am here with City Year," she said. "... We have 10 more job openings for people 17 years old or higher, who have either their high school diploma or GED, and who need some job experience working for a nonprofit."

The three volunteers then walked around the park handing out City Year fliers, in search of the youthful demographic that clearly wasn't in attendance at the town hall gathering.

Earlier in the day, over his first Tsunami lunch, Ward was asked to be silent and think of one thing he would change in the post-hurricane Louisiana. The answer didn't come quickly -- or definitively.

"The response to this is going to require a belief in what civil society can do, in what young people can do," Ward managed. "... We are dealing with something that has shaken loose the very foundation of this state."

