

# Inside Report for Mar. 2

## Program helps state as well as young volunteers

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Lanny Keller

Louisiana's problems are huge, but our state can look forward to help from the hearts and hands of dedicated young people in a new program called City Year Louisiana.

It was inaugurated Feb 21 on the steps of the State Capitol with the blessing of Gov. Kathleen Blanco and numerous other state leaders.

The team of volunteers, who receive a small living stipend and a small scholarship after completion of the program, are already working with children in local schools and participating in service projects — rebuilding playgrounds, helping restore homes and parks in flood-ravaged areas and becoming mentors to young people displaced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

City Year volunteer Cole Stark told about a young boy evacuated from New Orleans who is now at Kenilworth Middle School. Stark befriended the boy and learned that the youth, elected by his peers to the Valentine court, could not afford a suit to wear to the dance. A little collection later, and a trip to the mall to ask merchants to help out, and the boy's appearance was assured.

"A suit to wear to the dance is a small thing in what's going on in his life these days," Stark said, "but it was a big deal for a boy feeling down." Stark said his peers want to use City Year service to be "facilitators of joy for children all across Louisiana."

"I want to be a part of our nation's response to this crisis," volunteer Kelly Peterson said.

A City Year experience is definitely different, with the volunteers age 17 to 24 starting the day off with physical training and a huge emphasis on teamwork. The program emphasizes leadership development and bringing young people of different backgrounds together in common purpose, said LSU Athletic Director Skip Bertman, whose daughter Lori was one of the organizers of the City Year Louisiana effort.

"When you are supported on the days when you are not at your best, those are the days that you remember you are part of a team," Bertman said.

City Year was begun in 1988 as a summer program in Boston by two student friends, one of them the law school roommate of Sean Reilly of Baton Rouge. Reilly's future wife, Jennifer Eplett, also a Harvard student, helped launch that first program. It was the forerunner of AmeriCorps, the national youth service program.

Over the years, Eplett Reilly wanted to start a City Year program in Baton Rouge, and the hurricanes provided a chance to make that dream a reality. The Baton Rouge Area Foundation and corporate contributors made it happen financially, as did Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, whose office provided a start-up grant for organizing.

City Year's national board chairman, Eli Segal, was a longtime friend of Eplett Reilly and helped push the Louisiana program — usually taking two years or more to organize in a new city — into existence to help respond to the hurricane crisis. It was Segal's last contribution to the nation, as he died just as the City Year Louisiana program was inaugurated.

Speakers praised Segal and Eplett Reilly for making the program possible.

"Jennifer Eplett Reilly is a force of nature," the chairman of the Corporation for National Service, David Eisner, said. "It's just more efficient to say 'yes' right away, because eventually you will have to say it anyway.

"She sees what needs to be done and does it," Blanco said.

City Year Louisiana will be a real help in this crisis, U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge, said.

"Keep in mind you are talking to people who've lost it all, even pride," Baker told the volunteers. "Is (City Year) about putting a nail in a 2-by-4, or is it about putting a sense of hope in a person's life?"

Baker said the energy and enthusiasm of City Year Louisiana will be "restoring that in ways that you can't imagine at the time."

Lanny Keller is an editorial writer at The Advocate. His e-mail address is [lkeller@theadvocate.com](mailto:lkeller@theadvocate.com).