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Forgotten crisis

BRINGING FOCUS BACK TO NEW ORLEANS

Last winter, photographer Sara Speert of Decatur, Ga., joined a group of 16 other volunteers on a charitable mission to New Orleans. Organized by Jewish Funds for Social Justice (www.jewishjustice.org), the trip paired the volunteers with two organizations, the St. Bernard Project and the School at Blair Grocery.

The St. Bernard Project (www.stbernard-project.org) was started by two concerned citizens who had gone to New Orleans to help after Hurricane Katrina. Seeing how dire the situation was, they decided to stay on and create a long-term charitable organization to rebuild homes for people who can't afford to do it on their own.

The School at Blair Grocery was initiated by another New Orleans transplant, a New York

City teacher who went to New Orleans to help educate the children of Lower Ninth Ward, where the public high school is still closed. He procured space in an old grocery store, where he holds classes for the displaced students. School gardens will allow it to be self-sustaining through produce sales. (www.schoolatblairgrocery.blogspot.com)

Speert and the other volunteers provided labor for both projects, first helping to install insulation at a St. Bernard Project home, then assisting in the ongoing renovations of the School at Blair Grocery. The trip was only four days long, and Speert was astounded at the amount of work that still needed to be done throughout the city. As a photographer, she took it upon herself to document the situation and

spread the word about the huge needs in the Crescent City.

"It was eye opening to see the situation down there," she says. "Three and a half years after Hurricane Katrina, the city still isn't back to normal."

Yet, amidst the devastation, the crime, the mismanagement and the neglect, Speert was greatly moved by the enduring spirit of the people of New Orleans. Even in the hardest-hit areas, residents retain their pride in their hometown, and are resolved that the city will rise again. "The people who are there now are there because they want to be, not because they don't have a choice," says Speert. "The Ninth Ward, in particular, is a place where a rich culture has been passed down for generations. The people want to be there; they just need help."

To others interested in helping, Speert recommends contacting Volunteer New Orleans, an organization that links volunteers with projects (www.volunteerneworleans.com). She urges other photographers to use their talents to reawaken awareness. Visit the city. Document the situation. Spread the word. "We don't hear about it in the news anymore, so there's a perception that there's nothing wrong in New Orleans," says Speert. "I'm sure if the public saw images of the real situation, people would realize that the city still needs help." ■

For more about Sara Speert's trip, visit her blog at www.saraphotography.net and click on the New Orleans Movie link in the right-hand column.

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