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Rebuilding homes, rebuilding lives

By: **Matt Klar, Youth Writer**

As the plane took off, I peered down at a sight that would stick with me for the next four days. Staring back at me were the 1,894,436 dwellings of the Greater Toronto Area: millions of memories, smiles and holiday dinners. However, my destination was a city that would look far different. Where I was going, smiles and fond memories were in short supply. Where I was going, a region was still suffering the aftermath of the darkest week in its history. After Hurricane Katrina made landfall near Buras, Louisiana, on Aug. 29, 2005, southern Louisiana was devastated. Later that evening, the 17th Street Levee collapsed and more than 80 per cent of New Orleans was under water, destroying 160,000 homes. That is thousands of memories, smiles and holiday dinners.

Nine members of the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization and I journeyed to Chalmette, LA to rebuild houses with the National Relief Network. From there, we joined other youth groups from Toronto. We were assigned one of the houses that had applied for aid. What we saw couldn't be described in the black and white of newspaper stories, or from the mouth of a news anchor. What we saw was real life.

On week legs I walked into the kitchen. Or was this the kitchen? There was no sink or microwave, no toaster. No refrigerator. Just fragmented drywall and clouds of dirt. I removed hundreds of nails effortlessly, like flicking away an eyelash. But this was real life. Each nail was a piece of a home. These nails, which lay in bunches on the ground, once held together the lives and memories of this family. Every room looked the same, completely empty and broken. This was only the first 30 minutes on the work site. What remained of 3609 Jean Lafitte St. would be our home for the next three days.

I walked up the stairs and somehow wound up in a closet with a few old clothes, a badminton racket and a stack of old magazines. I picked up the magazine on top of the pile: The New Age Magazine from August 1989. As I flipped it over, dust rolled off the front cover, vanishing into the air. It has an address label. It has a name, Joseph D. Cutrer. This is his magazine. His magazine, in his closet. This is his house.

My heart skipped a beat. This trip, which I once thought would be "a good experience", or "look great on a resume", had become something much different. It was personal. Although the city once looked destroyed, a sense of hope is present on the streets of New Orleans.

It's the only city in the world where, on one short drive, you could find a crawfish po boy sandwich, a bowl of gumbo, world renowned beignets and nine Teenagers from Thornhill tearing down drywall in hardhats. Back at the site, car horns tooted as they drove by, recognizing us as volunteers. Each person we met was proud of the rebuilding effort. Joel Colman, the chaplain of the New Orleans Fire Department, told us 70 per cent of firefighters have been displaced by Katrina.

"The heartbreak that Katrina brought is lightened by the hope that you guys bring into New Orleans. Give hope to everyone you can," he said. Even more thanks are issued from Betty Lazarus, a librarian at a synagogue in Metairie, LA. "Something horrible has happened to our city. Thanks in part to volunteer groups like you, things are starting to improve."

No matter how many thanks we received that week, working on the site didn't feel like I was accomplishing as much as I would have liked. I wanted to be a hero for these people. It was one job on the site that pounded this message home: to rake the mounds of dead grass in what was once a back yard.

I have raked at home, but this was much different. There are overwhelming piles of destruction. I raked and carried on armloads to the garbage pile across the street where a FEMA truck would eventually dispose of it. I did this three or four more times. The pile never shrank. The yard remained in a shambles no matter how vigorously I raked or how much I carried. I would not be able to erase all the damage by myself, no matter how badly I wanted to. This house will only be finished when the last coat of paint dries against its brand new walls. My stomach ached, hollow.

I want to be there when the last coat of paint is brushed on the walls. I want to be holding the brush. The group sat down for lunch. I hit into what seemed like my 14th granola bar of the day, when a gold SUV parked in front of the house.

"Ooohhhheeee. Ye'll be here. I didn't know if y'all were gonna show up," the man said. "The name's Joseph."

I felt a lump in my throat. Joseph was the name on the magazine. This was his home. What was once a circle of vicious chewing and champing fell silent. Joseph Cutrer had the stage, as he stood on his front lawn on the corner house of Jean Lafitte St., staring at the ruins of his home.

With eyes nearly in tears, he gladly shared his story. Before the storm, things were going well. Joseph had retired and his wife, a teacher for 38 years, was planning her retirement nest.

Just two weeks before Katrina, the family cancelled half their insurance, something Mr. Cutrer described as, "The worst mistake I'd ever made in my whole life."

He paused in the middle of his sentence.

"I'm sorry. But I just get really sick every time I come down here," he said.

"I had ridden out all the storms, way back when and we all thought we was gonna survive. The morning after the storm hit, I got a call from the fellow across the street. He told me there was water above the door and I knew something terrible was happening.

"The first time I came down here, there was 1.6 inches of mud in the streets. I was just shocked when I'd seen so much destruction done in such a short time," he said.

"At the age I am now, you just can't do what you want to do. I just don't know what to do anymore."

Listening to the story was harder than any dead grass I had to rake, or bricks I needed to lift. Listening to perhaps the most special thank you I've ever received was much harder.

"Y'all are a blessing. I'm just so glad that you all took the time to care and come down here to help us. I appreciate you all very much. You will all be blessed. I'm glad y'all had the heart enough to come down here."

Before Mr. Cutrer drove back to his temporary home, two hours from his real one, he posed for some group photos. Everyone smiles and stares directly into the camera lens, but I couldn't help but look down the road.

There was not one home in good condition. There was no sign of civilization, a deserted suburbia, except for a church across the street.

And suddenly in the heart of this city, only a few hours by plane from my house, my life felt very foreign.

But I looked back into the eyes of Mr. Cutrer, as his eyes wandered around his old neighbourhood. I saw the gratitude and it no longer mattered that the pile of dead grass wouldn't go down. For a few hours, on a few days of the year, we took time out of our lives and restored hope.

Matt Klar is a student at Thornhill Secondary School and a member of the York Region Media Group's y-team. You can contact him c/o dleezel@yrmg.com

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