

New Orleans

Experiencing the Aftermath



Senior Sam Gordon looks at the remnants of the Ninth Ward, an area that suffered immense damage after Hurricane Katrina.



Houses that were affected by Katrina were marked with symbols that relayed number of pets, date checked, etc...



Seminars for Scholars participants Heather Bednar, Ron Herout, Amanda Swanson and Branka Cimesia paint Live Oak Elementary in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Taking a closer look

By Donny Thornton

In every student's high school career, there are many ups and downs that go with the daily routine of classes, after-school activities, and attending sporting events. An interesting field trip or an in-class demonstration that fully engulfs you occasionally offsets that daily grind, and for a moment, you forget you were even at school. This year at Antioch Community High School (ACHS), there was one "field trip" that took the cake.

ACHS had the opportunity to visit New Orleans, Louisiana for three days on March 2-4. ACHS principal Mike Nekritz's pioneer program, Seminar for Scholars, was the lucky group that got to experience this once-in-a-lifetime chance to perform community service for the still ailing city that was ravaged by Hurricane Katrina almost three years ago.

Fifteen students were selected to participate and travel to New Orleans for a community service project put together by sponsor Nekritz and businessman Gary Solomon, who runs a company out of Chicago by the name of Synesi Associates, that is geared toward working with schools and school districts to better the education of students, whether it be financial, operations of the school, or teacher incentive. Solomon has talked with the Seminar students before about education problems throughout the entire United States, and one of the particularly bad areas with school financial hardships is New Orleans and the surrounding parishes.

After Katrina had finished tearing through the city, almost a year and a half later there was progress on putting the school district back on its feet, opening select numbers of schools throughout the parishes. The problem was that there were more students than there were schools. Overcrowding and travel are still huge sore spots in the New Orleans

school districts. More and more students chose not to attend school in order to help out with rebuilding or trying to salvage what they could from their houses that had been decimated by the hurricane. One of the districts that got hit the hardest was the "ninth ward", which is right next to one of the levees that failed. ACHS senior and Seminar participant Zack Simonini thought it was a moving experience.

"I really thought that the media had portrayed the "ninth ward" as some kind of disaster zone after three years, and in actuality it is better than the media makes it out to be." Simonini along with the 14 other students experienced the same feeling walking through the decimated lots of the "ninth ward", seeing collapsed buildings, gymnasiums half-destroyed, and remnants of houses and material possessions left by the families that once had lived there. "It is good to have a better sense of understanding and there is a certain feeling you get when you actually see first-hand what this city is going through," said Simonini.

Seminar for Scholars' agenda for the trip was to do a whole number of things, including manual labor by painting the walls of Live Oak Elementary School, which was in desperate need of a makeover throughout the hallways and stairwells. Students painted, cleaned up outside areas, and touched up imperfections in the walls and stairs throughout the school.

The students were also able to have the opportunity to read to classes full of first and second graders on March 3, which is less commonly known as Dr. Seuss' birthday, so there were plenty of "Red Fish, Blue Fish" and "Green Eggs and Ham" to be had. Seminar participants donned "Cat in the Hat" hats and met with children that had been displaced by the storm.

Overall, the mood in New Orleans was not one of grief and gloom, but quite the opposite, the city is thriving once again, and there are significant steps forward to the city being back on its feet and thriving once more as the city of Jazz that it was and still is.

Reading, writing and rebuilding

By Heidi Schoepp

In October of 2007, Antioch Community High School's (ACHS) Seminars for Scholars met with Gary Solomon, a former teacher, and now one of the prime contributors to the restoration of the New Orleans' education system, which had already been destroyed prior to hurricane Katrina in 2006.

According to Solomon, those involved with the restoration and rebuilding of the system as a whole view Katrina not as a disaster, but as a turning point, an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start anew, so to speak.

"There was one system over all of the schools called the Orleans Parish," said Solomon. "Over 100 of them failed to meet NCLB [No Child Left Behind] standards."

Recently, Solomon made arrangements to give Seminars for Scholars students a first-hand look at what exactly he had been up to.

"I actually was anticipating the area [the French Quarter] to be much worse," said Jordan Palmer, junior at ACHS and member of Seminars of Scholars. "I understand the extent of what happened, but until I saw the Lower 9th Ward, I had never felt it. Now I do."

Palmer feels that a combination of the lack of funding, being unable to find able teachers and

the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) test, an exam that all seniors are required to take in order to graduate from high school, play a large part in the current disadvantages to the system.

Nevertheless, despite all that is still in need of repair, what has been done so far is an improvement. That in itself is something to be recognized.

For the schools that were performing the worst, "recovery districts" have been created, as well as charter schools, according to Solomon. "This is the second year [of rebuilding] and over 30 schools are functional," Solomon said.

It has been three years since Katrina, and even with the progress that's been made so far, there is still a long way to go before the educational foundation of New Orleans takes effect. Fortunately, the students of the Seminars for Scholars group were able to see the city in the middle of its recovery period and experience it on a more personal level than just reading or talking about it.

"Equal education is a major issue to me," said Palmer. "... to hear that everything is still so unorganized is heartbreaking... from the people

I spoke with, honors [and] accelerated programs are needed and instead of 'slacker electives' as one student put it, they want more beneficial classes that will help them with the LEAP test and college."

As important as the actual curriculum and tools needed to help students learn, the fields and playgrounds on which children play and "blow off steam," and the buildings in which they attend school, according to former teacher Troy Peloquin, are being renovated with more care than they have seen in more than 40 years.

"Our schools and classrooms are being built with up-to-the-minute technology and teacher training," Peloquin said. "Cutting edge technology in a New Orleans public school is

not a thing I dreamed I'd ever see. Schools that haven't been touched in 40 years are getting painted and landscaped, showing the students that they are worthwhile, and that someone cares for them. I am amazed at what a coat of paint can do to create school pride and a feeling of ownership for the students."

"I am amazed at what a coat of paint can do to create school pride and a feeling of ownership for the students."

-Troy Peloquin
RSD Volunteer
Coordinator

Photos by Donny Thornton Layout by Heidi Schoepp

What you don't know

By Ashley Meyer

After Hurricane Katrina, which left so many sites and land areas bare, it was hard to see the good that came out of it.

Senior Kaitlyn Fox admitted that even before the devastation, the administration had been corrupted in the educational system.

"You can only go up from here," stated Fox. When finally the students were transferred to other schools in nearby cities, or even states, citizens didn't take kindly to the New Orleans residents.

Fox said, "I wasn't aware of the horrors or discriminations... but people just weren't accepting."

She further went on to say, "Even though the city of New Orleans is back on its feet, a lot of other people think the rest of the city is prospering."

In reality, the city, both inside and out, is struggling

financially and economically.

After senior Jenny Welch heard about the students evacuating to different states, she was told that kids were treated as outcasts.

"People thought [the New Orleans kids] would bring gangs and violence to their new schools. It's not fair because the schools they ended up being placed at looked down on them, but these kids had no other option."

Volunteer and Antioch Community High School (ACHS) drama teacher Wanda Teddy was just as stunned as the students.

"I had no preconceived notion as to what I would expect in New Orleans," said Teddy.

For her first time traveling to New Orleans, she admitted, "The school environment down there is nothing like what we have here. The students have no respect for the teachers. They constantly ditch... the schools have a difficult time keeping good teachers."

In an estimate, she said one day of the week, in a school of 700 students, maybe 200 would be absent. Teddy asked two boys why they ditch and they replied that if they don't feel like they'll learn anything on a certain day, they just won't show up.

"People may still remember New Orleans as a party city, but it's not nearly as prevalent now," said Teddy.

Overall, the experience was very influential among not only students, but faculty as well.

Teddy concluded, "Eventually, I want to go down and do more volunteer work."

Background: Students and sponsors view the devastated Ninth Ward in New Orleans