

US students toil on Katrina relief for spring break

By Jeffrey Jones
REUTERS 

PASS CHRISTIAN, March 6 — It isn't the spring-break beach holiday most U.S. college students dream of, but with the shore still strewn with wreckage and homes in shambles from Hurricane Katrina, the Gulf Coast is the destination of choice for thousands like Greg Hall.

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 COMPLETE STORY 

The 18-year-old University of Toledo engineering student is spending the week in ravaged Pass Christian, Mississippi, gutting and rebuilding houses along with 124 others from his Ohio school. Their holiday accommodation is a wind-battered auditorium jammed with cots and sleeping bags.

"This is better than lying on some beach," Hall said as he swatted at a cloud of tiny insects. "The devastation is amazing, but I'm in engineering so I'm looking at this as a way to see how things are built."

College kids from across the United States have answered the call to forsake March parties in Daytona Beach, Florida, and Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, in favor of fixing and cleaning homes, schools and community centers in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana.

The Aug. 29 hurricane killed 1,300 people along the coast and in New Orleans and another 2,000 are still listed as missing. As many as 300,000 homes were damaged or destroyed.

Along Interstate 90 through Pass Christian, Gulfport and Biloxi, Mississippi, the effects are still staggering, with half-collapsed hotels, gas stations reduced to steel skeletons and scraped-up concrete pads where homes once stood.

Six months after the storm there is more than enough work for thousands of students from universities like Pennsylvania State, Howard, Rutgers, Washington and many more.

EXTRA HANDS

Hall is one of 7,000 marshaled by a group called Campus Crusade for Christ. The United Way and MTV are sending 100 spring breakers to Biloxi and Foley, Alabama.

Katrina On the Ground, supported by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and National Urban League, hopes to recruit 1,000 African-American students by pointing out blacks accounted for 44 percent of storm victims.

Many students are paying their own way and some have held pledge drives to fund trips to sites where the work is hard and accommodations spartan.

The temporary influx in Pass Christian, a town of 6,500 people, has created few problems for locals despite scant resources, said Lieut. Greg Federico of the Harrison Country Sheriff's Dept. Many displaced residents still live in green military tents.

"It means extra hands. And we absolutely need any help," he said. In fact, students began arriving just after Katrina and "they've been just working their butts off."

About 60 miles west in New Orleans, where some neighborhoods remain in a state of suspended ruin, grassroots aid group Common Ground Relief expects 1,000-2,000 students to join its cleanup and community relief work in poor areas.

At one center of its operations at St. Mary of the Angels School in the Ninth Ward, Stephen O'Connell, an economics major from Boston College, is back for spring break after volunteering here over winter vacation.

The hardest part of the work is watching the plodding pace of recovery in low-income neighborhoods that were so hard-hit by the flooding after Katrina, O'Connell, 20, said.

"It's just so empty here," he said as a circular saw whined nearby. "Once I started talking to community members, I saw how hard it was for them just to return back to their homes."

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