Employees in the Nation’s Service

Several employees traveled to the Gulf Coast region to help strangers devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Princeton’s Humanitarian Relief Efforts policy made their trips possible. Sharon Cohen, department manager, Department of Molecular Biology; Nicholas “Nick” Diehl, associate ombudsperson, Office of the University Ombudsperson; Jane Hunter, student health plan assistant, University Health Services; and Catherine “Cathy” Kerr, program manager, Pace Center, share their experiences.

Sharon, an early responder, drove to Mississippi in January 2006. She felt compelled to go because the hurricane had created “a horrible disaster [in the area].” Living in a “tent city” among other volunteers and victims, Sharon found “the area looking like a war zone. Roofs were off homes, trees were twisted, debris was still everywhere.” She volunteered in Biloxi, Pass Christian, Wavelry, and East St. Louis. Initially, she performed office work. She organized survey data collected about people’s needs to make retrieval easier. She also worked at a Salvation Army distribution center where she reorganized food and clothes to facilitate distribution. She helped to organize and consolidate storage tents and do “what she could” to give out supplies. She described how one volunteer organization, Hands on USA, was able “to cut through bureaucratic red tape” and “fix one crisis to move on to the next one.” Sharon walked throughout the area to meet people. She listened to their problems and reported what she heard to local authorities. Sharon proudly reported that “[employees in] the Department of Molecular Biology contributed $1,400 to help some of the storm victims.” She hopes to take another trip to help out. She hopes she can put her management skills to work, possibly at Dillard University.

For some time, Nick had been planning how he could help out in the Gulf Coast region by using his conflict resolution skills. Working through various professional contacts, Nick identified STEPS, a coalition of non-profit human relief organizations, and he contacted its director. He began consulting by telephone to help the organization deal with a number of issues that were preventing the group from functioning well. In July 2007 Nick headed to Mississippi where he facilitated an on-site all day meeting for a committed and diverse group of approximately 55 paid workers and volunteers. The session helped the group “voice concerns, find ways to collaborate and set a direction” for the relief efforts needed to be done. He also provided an all-day training to a group of approximately 20 workers who were seeking additional skills in conflict management, facilitation, and work collaboration. Nick approached this project very carefully since he was “unfamiliar with the culture in Biloxi and understood that any assistance could only be provided in a respectful and culturally-aware manner.” He needed “to listen carefully to what Biloxi residents said and not impose his solutions on the group [and] that to be effective, [he] needed to earn trust.” Over the several days that Nick was in Biloxi, he felt that he was successful in helping the Coalition move forward.

Jane and her husband John, a senior technician in the School of Architecture, had lived through a category 3 hurricane when they lived in Cape Hatteras. They knew first-hand what people in the Gulf Coast were facing. They went to Louisiana initially in November 2006 and returned during Christmas to help gut a house and put up walls. They met an elderly couple in Old Bayou and decided to continue to help them to rebuild their home. Jane recalled that the labor bids were very costly and, consequently, she and John organized 6 employees from the Facilities Department to become involved and accompany them on their next trip in March. Together with electrician Joseph “Joe” Huck, electrician Donald “Don” De Franco, carpenter Gary Mayer, carpenter Todd Applewhite, roofer/tinner Drew
Slimmer, and roofer/tinner Alton “Jim” Miller, they did various carpentry, roofing, plumbing, and electrical work to begin to make the house habitable. The Hunters continue to help the couple. Jane created a spreadsheet to track everything that needs to be done to enable the couple to leave their FEMA trailer and return to their home. To advance this project, the Hunters raised $540 from Health Services staff to purchase a stove and $800 from Facilities and their home neighborhood. Jane hopes to return there later this year.

Helping others is what drew Cathy to her job at the Pace center. With her strongly held belief “that we all have an obligation to make the world a better place,” Cathy signed up to go on a volunteer church trip to Bayou-LaBatre, Alabama, orchestrated by the Disaster Recovery Ministry for 4 days this summer. There she labored in a home damaged by water and mold. She said she made a “good carpenter’s helper” as she worked on the carpentry team that replaced exterior doors and stairways. Previously, Cathy had done similar volunteer work with Habitat for Humanity in Lambertville, Pennsylvania. Although the work was physically hard, made more intense by the hot and humid weather, Cathy wanted to utilize every minute she was there to contribute. Unfortunately, there were times when they had to wait for supplies and carpeting to arrive. Similar to what others experienced, she said she labor costs were very high due to the increased demand, and most victims’ insurance reimbursements were inadequate to cover the cost of repairs. She described the family as “relieved to get help” particularly since a portion of their home remained inhabitable due to the “heavy mold [which] was very unhealthy.”

Cathy, Jane, Nick and Sharon said they were grateful for the University’s policy because it enabled them to go. They were reimbursed for their travel expenses and were given paid time off which did not necessitate them using their vacation accruals. Sharon commented that her experience “makes you appreciate what you have.” When the University extended the policy, Nick thought “Princeton University was sending a strong message that the area still needs help.” Cathy noted that people were thankful to her and to Princeton University for all of the support given. They each had a life-changing experience and want others to know much more help is still needed. They encourage all employees to consider going. The region needs all kinds of unskilled and skilled workers. Jane summed it up by saying, “We all have something we can offer. We get back more than we give. The gratitude [of the victims] feeds you.”

Read more about the Humanitarian Relief Efforts policy at www.princeton.edu/hr/policies/leaves/323.htm.