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## Helping Rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane has Changed Residents – and Me

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## Helping Rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane has Changed Residents – and Me

**By Christal Peterson**  
UCF Forum columnist  
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It all started with a hammer. Actually, it all started with THE hammer.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped through New Orleans leaving nothing but endless flooding, destroyed homes, lost lives and displaced families throughout the United States. A year later, 10 graduate students from UCF's DeVos Sports Business Management program, director Richard Lapchick and his family were repairing bicycles and cleaning up parks at a church in the city's hardest-hit area, the Lower Ninth Ward.

As the trip went on, the group was approached by many in the community about a man named Stanley Stewart, whose house – like many others – was heavily damaged. Stewart, who embodies the spirit and optimism of New Orleans, said he was not going to let the hurricane run him out of his home. He stayed put with his family, but the aftermath of Katrina proved to be more than what he could have imaged.

After the levees were breached by the flooding, his family was left stranded on the top of their two-story house for a day and half before they were rescued and taken to the city's convention center for shelter. In all the confusion and without identification, they were inadvertently separated in the packed convention center for a while before they were reunited and later returned to their neighborhood to live in a FEMA trailer. Two years after the hurricane and 10 months after the DeVos program used that first hammer to start rebuilding Stewart's home, he and his family were able to return to the home they thought had been taken from them forever.

Soon afterward an idea was born and in February 2007, with the help of the New Orleans City Council president Arnie Franklin, the DeVos program founded the Hope for Stanley Alliance. Since then, volunteers have made 52 trips to New Orleans and Baton Rouge, LA, and Tuscaloosa, AL, to help residents get back on their feet. Hope for Stanley volunteers have given more than 50,000 hours of service and have worked on 140 homes. No other organization from another state has done more.

That's where my story comes into play. I am currently in the business program coming up on my last semester before I receive my MBA and also one semester out from getting

my second master's in sports business management. What really caught my attention about the program was the impact the program had not only our Orlando community, but in places across the United States. It's just something about sports that has the power to change the world, and this statement still holds true to this day.

Out of 52 trips, I have been fortunate to go on three, which all hold a special place in my heart and have affected my outlook of life.

Here's a glimpse into my heart:

During each day in New Orleans my physical, mental and emotional toughness was tested. Painting, scrubbing mold, and learning to install drywall took me out of my comfort zone and put me in a position to grow as woman, as a teammate and as a volunteer.

Though the work was obviously rewarding, it was the long talks and heart-to-hearts with the homeowners about their personal stories throughout Hurricane Katrina that gave me more insight. As the week passed, we were greeted by the residents with encouraging words and constant appreciation for what we were doing for them.

But the people of New Orleans never skipped a beat. We were always greeted with the biggest smiles, they cooked for us (and you know the food was bomb), and we even saw children from the neighborhood playing basketball in the streets like there was never a ravaged city.

This trip put a lot of things into perspective for me. It taught me that in a matter of seconds your life can change. It shouldn't take a natural disaster to build a personal connection with someone you've never met, let alone an entire community.

For me, walking around the Lower Ninth Ward a dozen years after Hurricane Katrina reminded me a lot of my own childhood neighborhood, which I appreciate for the many things it offered me.

What really made this moment resonant with me was the mixture of positive and negative comments from those working around me. Even though New Orleans' revitalization is not where it needs to be, it has definitely improved since 2005. Being able to take a step back to realize that many of my classmates come from different walks of life and that some have never experienced being in conditions similar to those in New Orleans has turned into a teachable moment for everyone.

Even when they were down, the people of New Orleans showed us their positive energy and a hospitality like no other.

Hope for Stanley is always a trip I look forward to every semester because not only do I get to be a part of something bigger than myself by helping others, I get to do it alongside my classmates – building lasting friendships and memories that will never lose significance in the years to come.

And to think it all started with the hammer...

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