

When the students of the Virginia Tech chapter of CMAA realized they would be visiting the Club Managers Association of America (CMAA) national conference in New Orleans, many things ran through their minds. While the excitement of visiting Bourbon Street just before Mardi Gras was certainly among those thoughts, another was the feeling that it would be great to volunteer for those who were hardest hit in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

As many are aware, the Virginia Tech campus is no stranger to tragedy. For these students, the events of April 16 and the senseless deaths of 32 of their fellow classmates and faculty will forever live in their minds. They have seen first-hand what it is like to have an outpouring of support from so many people, the vast majority of which they never knew before that day. They also understand what it is like to come together as a community and rally around each other.

With assistance from their chapter advisor, Tom Duetsch, CCM, the students sought local volunteer opportunities in the New Orleans area and learned of the St. Bernard Community Center, which sits about 6 miles from downtown New Orleans in the heart of St. Bernard Parish, one of the communities hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina. St. Bernard Parish was hit with a 30 foot tidal surge on August 29, 2005 and nearly 100% of the homes and businesses were severely damaged or completely destroyed.

On February 5, the VT CMAA students boarded public busses from downtown new Orleans for the 30 minute ride to St. Bernard Parish. Along the way, they passed so many abandoned residences and businesses that they lost count. Almost three and one half years after Hurricane Katrina, many areas still look like a scene from a Third-World country or war movie.

Upon arrival at the St. Bernard Community Center, the VT CMAA students were greeted by Mr. Nabatoff, the Center's executive director. During a brief orientation they learned of the center's primary purpose. From medical, job, or food stamp assistance to basic food and clothing help, the center exists to aid hurricane survivors with the tools necessary to rebuild their lives.

Our students were then split into various groups to assist with food distribution, clothing distribution, or meal creation. One group moved box after box of food supplies and re-stocked a food pantry in a corner of the community center (in 2008, the pantry gave out more than 245,000 pounds of food to low-income families). The small shelves were filled with bread, fruits, vegetables, MREs (pre-packaged meals ready to eat), tea, and even dog and cat food. One by one, families who had been waiting in line were called into that part of the building to make their selections (strict limits on how many of each item they could take were enforced). The VT CMAA students assisted many of these residents, especially the elderly ones, with selecting their food, putting it into boxes, and then "checking out" with one of the volunteers. Other students then escorted the residents outside the building to their cars or houses if they were located close by.

Another group assisted with clothing distribution (each week more than 200 families receive free clothing from the shelter). They pulled bag after bag of donated, used clothing from a storage box outside the community center. Items were removed from the bag, checked, and then placed on hangers in a clothing area. Once again, residents were called one-by-one to the area to make clothing selections for their families and the VT CMAA students assisted with this effort. Throughout the course of the day,

we returned to that storage box and continued to fill the clothing racks for the residents to choose items.

A third group spent time in a small kitchen making lunch for an estimated 150 residents that day. Other than a three compartment sink, there was a residential stove top/oven and refrigerator. Given 4 boxes of rice, a gallon of chili sauce, some carrots, and prepackages tacos, the VT students became the day's lunch cooks. There was no hot water as the water heater had broken weeks before and they did not have the resources yet to replace it. Sanitation was an obvious issue and ammonia was used for almost all disinfecting needs. On the bright side, there was a commercial refrigerator in the back storage area that was new when it was donated after Katrina. Unfortunately, the inside of the cooler was full of mold and food stock that had yet to be used to make meals. Some of our students with ServSafe certification disinfected the entire refrigerator, discarded unsafe food product, and setup a system for storing food in a safe manner.

The residents of St. Bernard who used the community center that day embraced our student volunteers. They had smiles on their faces and seemed at peace reliving their experiences for our students. One particularly heart-breaking story was told by Steve, a volunteer who lost everything in the hurricane. He told us of how the levee break completely engulfed his house and he had to escape into the attic with his wife, who was bound to a wheel chair. With vivid detail, he explained how he had to cut a hole in his roof and then wait FOUR days to be rescued. Steve lost his wife a few short months later. Now, he volunteers seven days a week at the community center, helping everyone he can and using his helping skills as a crutch to manage his own heartache.

The Virginia Tech motto, Ut Prosim, that I may serve, is a phrase used often on our campus. There was little doubt that as our volunteer day ended, a permanent impression has been made in the minds of our students. While there was much hard work accomplished, just as much was learned by listening to the experiences of the men, women, and children who live in this community.

Student Quotes:

Landon White, HTM '10 - Volunteering for the St. Bernard Parish Community Center was a very eye opening and humbling experience. I had no idea the area was still so extremely devastated. It was really hard to see where the residents lived and what they go through. I felt so thankful to have the life that I do. I was also very surprised at the resilience of the St. Bernard community. After the storm they could have left it all behind and started over, but instead they came back and have committed their lives to putting the community back together.

Angela Kasey, IDST '09 - From spending the day at the Community Center of St. Bernard, I got the sense of love and service that was seen after the April 16th tragedy at Virginia Tech. There was a definite sense of hope and pride. The people of St. Bernard Parish went through an unspeakable tragedy. They lost everything, but still held their heads high and refused to give up on their community.

Mary Karvetski, HTM '09 - It made me very sad to see all of those people that were in so much need, yet still pulling through and trying to make the best out of their situation. I was surprised that the area still needs so much assistance after almost 4 years. It's sad that the media has basically forgotten about this area when the people still need so much help with food and supplies and rebuilding their community. I'm glad I volunteered for the community center because it was a very eye opening experience and made me appreciate everything I have in my life.

Kristen Murphy, HTM '09 - I am really glad we took the time while down in New Orleans to give back to the community. The people there have been through so much. The stories we heard at the Community Center were ones I will never forget; they touched my heart and made me wish I could have helped out more. The feeling I got after spending some hours there was incredible. My heart really goes out to everyone who was affected by the Hurricane.

Tanya Richards, HTM '09 - The pictures on the news do no justice for the heartfelt stories of the actual people who lived through a tragedy like Hurricane Katrina. Visiting the St. Bernard Community Center was one of the most eye opening experiences of my life.

Maelka Buonviri, HTM '10 - The experience of volunteering really made me sit back and think about how truly blessed we are. These people were left with close to nothing and yet were so grateful for the food, clothing and assistance they received.

Riley Inman, HTM '09 - In volunteering at the community center, I was amazed at how gracious everyone was for our help and how lucky we are. It was a very humbling experience and made me appreciate the small things in life that I take for granted like food, and clothing and shelter.