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Industry Members Get their Hands Dirty in Katrina Ravaged Communities

The following account was written by Marcy Tieger, a consultant with the collision repair industry consulting firm, Symphony Advisors, LLC. Marcy and a couple of well-known industry members spent part of their summer in New Orleans helping to rebuild the communities devastated by Hurricane Katrina. On this one year anniversary of the storm, we present her story:

On August 6, 2006, Matthew Ohrnstein of Symphony Advisors, Vincent Romans of The Romans Group, my daughter Rose, and I joined Habitat for Humanity in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, gutting houses which were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. We also delivered checks from some very big-hearted collision repair industry members. For me, it was a bittersweet postscript to a love affair with the city that dates back to my first visit at the age of 13.

Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana on August 29, 2005. In the days leading up to it, I was glued to the television. I was a critic of those who did not leave the area when information about the impending disaster was so plentiful. What I didn't know was that many of those most adversely impacted had no TV. Indeed, many people, had no phones let alone luxuries like a car, so they could flee to a safe location. I think part of my time "serving" the area was repentance for the arrogance of my thinking. And, at the risk of sounding too political, I might add that the government, and especially the local government, failed these people horribly, stalled by its own arrogance and poor planning.

There is truth in the expression, "you have to see it to believe it." I can only say that portions of New Orleans and surrounding areas are still a war zone. Unending stretches of neighborhoods and commercial shopping areas are ghost towns, and the likelihood of their return is still uncertain. The surge of water that impacted the area remained for weeks before it receded. In the process, it created a stew of mud, toxic chemicals, and the byproducts of human waste and human death.



Vince Romans (above left) and Matt Ohrnstein outside just one of the storm damaged homes in New Orleans.



Although Habitat For Humanity is more commonly associated with building homes, the project we joined, with its hub at "Camp Hope," in St. Bernard Parish (12 miles east of the French Quarter of New Orleans) involved tearing them down. More specifically, the volunteers of Habitat For Humanity and AmeriCorps (a volunteer program for young people sponsored by the Federal Government) helped poor and elderly homeowners (many of whom were uninsured, underinsured or whose claims were denied due to policy exclusions) by gutting their homes.



Participants were required to wear steel-toed boots, gloves, N 95 respirator masks, goggles and hard hats. Our training ("orientation") included protocols for confirming that gas and electricity were turned off, removal of appliances (i.e. ovens, stoves and refrigerators-"whatever you do, don't be the curious person who opens the refrigerator!") recognition of dangerous snakes and spiders, disposal of hazardous materials, proper use of tools such as axes and crowbars (there were no power tools), and warnings about touching your face without proper hand washing and hydration.

Each day began at 5:00 a.m. We elected to stay in the French Quarter rather than Camp Hope, which offered a dormitory setting, three meals a day and FEMA issued water in generic silver cans with black script that read "FILTERED DRINKING WATER." It was agreed that it tasted vaguely like water from a garden hose of dubious origin. We would leave our hotel at 5:30 and drive to St. Bernard Parish, crossing some of the hardest hit, most impoverished and crime ridden areas of Louisiana, where military personnel in humvees was a common sight. The temperature by this time of day was 80 degrees and climbing. Humidity? Don't even ask.

By 6:15 we were on the school bus with our team, "Black 5," and usually two other teams. Each team was responsible for gutting a house. By 7:00 am, we were at "our house," grabbing our tools to begin gutting. "Gutting" in this case was a combination archeological dig and hazmat clean up. If a valuable was located and was in good condition, it was set aside. Aggressive shoveling to get through the mess could result in broken or overlooked valuables. What an individual elected to set aside or perceived as "valuable" presented a poignant window into the soul of the salvager.

After working our way through the fused muck and debris, we would remove the mud-laden carpet and padding and scrape the floor down to the foundation. After that, dry wall and fiberglass insulation was removed. The dry wall had become so soft and powdery that much of it could be removed in sizable chunks with a gentle hand. Our goal was to get down to the studs so the homeowner could have the wood treated for mold and rebuild.

We would work 45 to 60 minute stretches before we had to take a break to breathe fresh air and drink some water.

Our workday usually ended when the yellow school bus picked us up at 1:30 or so before the highest heat of the day. There was a strange calm among the volunteers on the ride back to camp. Part of this was fatigue, I'm sure. But I believe there was another component. It was the sheer weight of understanding on a granular level the extent of the devastation. You have searched the contents of the mud-caked handbag in the closet in the bedroom of the empty house in the abandoned neighborhood of the crippled community. You now truly understand.

Many Katrina victims have left the area and will never return. Others live in FEMA issued trailers in front of their homes or in large lots, now "neighborhoods," with row upon row of identical trailers. Suicide and domestic violence is on the rise, all associated with Katrina's aftermath. At the same time, there are many more people full of hope.

So what can you do for New Orleans? As you already know, the collision industry through the National Auto Body Council and the Collision Industry Foundation, quickly stepped up in unprecedented fashion, to assist with relocation, tool replacement and fundraising for industry members impacted by Katrina. Many individual shop owners and their employees donated and raised money to assist victims, as well.

There is still more physical labor that needs to be done. It is not very glamorous, but it is definitely good for the soul. The government has threatened to bulldoze homes that are not gutted and positioned for rebuilding. However, it is foreseeable that the bulldozing will not occur overnight and therefore further gutting can be done. (This is my opinion only; you can check with Habitat for Humanity for further details.)

Additionally, Habitat for Humanity and other organizations are engaged in projects in New Orleans and surrounding areas where volunteers are needed. (Just go on line and type "volunteer in New Orleans" to find volunteer opportunities -- it's a good place to start.)

If you are affiliated with a religious group, see what they are doing. It may not be your local group, but consider the joy of joining a fellow church, synagogue or mosque from another part of the country in a worthy volunteer effort.

You can also help New Orleans by donating money earmarked for rebuilding and Katrina Relief. Better yet, spend money in New Orleans. Schedule a C.I.C. or I-CAR meeting, planning session, retreat, or 20 Group meeting there.

New Orleans still possesses the soulful earthiness it did before Katrina, perhaps even more now. There are only limited remnants of damage in the French Quarter. The hotels are up and running. The restaurants are world class and the music-- jazz, blues, gospel, funk-- you name it, is amazing. What the area is missing is the buzz of visitors. Go there and then spread the word that New Orleans is on the road to recovery.

[Additional information and a short video on the St. Bernard Recovery Project](#)

[Marcy Tieger](#) is a consultant with Symphony Advisors, LLC, a firm focused on delivering strategic, operational and financial advisory services to the automobile aftermarket parts and services supply chain and to automobile insurance physical damage claims organizations.

Think You're Up to It?

For readers who may consider doing this type of work, but think they may not be hearty enough, Marcy notes, "our team consisted of the members identified above, as well as Dave, a 40-something musician from Pennsylvania, Duncan, a 24 year old from Wales, Cara, an AmeriCorps volunteer from Oklahoma who graduated from college two years earlier, Kyle, a 17 year old high school student from Boston, Mike and Erica, college students from Boston, and Steve, another college student from New York. Later in the week, we were joined by a father and his two children, a daughter age 16, a son maybe 19 or 20 and the son's girlfriend, all from North Carolina. (For the record, Matthew, Vince and I are in our late 40's, early 50's.)

"My two greatest heroes on the team were Dave, who is an insulin dependent diabetic who both tested and injected himself at the job site and my skinny 16 year old daughter, who blew me away with her strength and stamina. Steve 'needed a break' and didn't show on day two, and one other day, and Mike got sick after gutting houses for three weeks straight, but many people on other teams did not return after one day of gutting due to the rigors of the work.