

AmeriCorps volunteers still working to rebuild Gulf Coast

AP-May 25, 2006

LAKE CHARLES, La. -- About two dozen AmeriCorps volunteers from across the country are in the Lake Charles area to make good on one of the program's slogans: "Your world. Your chance to make it better."

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, AmeriCorps stationed 80 percent of its National Civilian Community Corps on the Gulf Coast _ with 28 teams, or about 300 people, in Louisiana alone.

The NCCC is composed of college graduates who want to "give back to the world," said Erin Jesberger, a member of one of two AmeriCorps teams in area.

"I'm fresh out of college, and it's a good way to figure out what to do," she said. "It's also neat getting to experience the different cultures." Jesberger had been in New Orleans helping with reconstruction, but she recently traveled to Moss Bluff, where she was awed by the destruction.

"I was surprised," she said. "Months after, there is still so much devastation." Kelly Murphy of South Dakota said the media coverage of Katrina dampened her awareness of the destruction caused by Rita.

"I had heard a lot about Katrina, but I didn't hear as much about Rita," she said. "So you don't think it's bad." Jesberger and other NCCC members in Moss Bluff cleared debris and tree limbs in residential areas. Members of one family said the volunteers will never know how grateful they are for the help.

Buddy and Pam Martin were faced with many obstacles and said they were humbled by the group's service. Buddy suffers from congestive heart failure and has been unable to return to work since Hurricane Rita. His wife, Pam, has epilepsy. After getting information about the NCCC from their neighbor, the family was offered service, Buddy said.

He commended the group for everything it has done and plans to do. "The AmeriCorps NCCC is the greatest in the country. It teaches the kids teamwork, how to conserve, pool money, but most importantly, it teaches values," he said. "These will be the greatest leaders. Our hearts are so full."

NCCC members worked for hours two days this month removing downed trees from the Martins' yard. "We couldn't do it alone," Pam Martin said. "They'll never know how much we appreciate it. They're such wonderful kids."

The NCCC members, who are staying at the Purple Heart Center Recreational Center in Lake Charles, have participated in various community events, including Relay for Life. Murphy said it's been an honor working with all the families. "Everyone has been very appreciative and very hospitable," she said. "It's a good feeling to be able to see the work you've done."

Copyright 2006 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.