



"WE ARE CARRYING
BACK A MESSAGE
OF 'HELP' FROM
NEW ORLEANS."
— ERIC HUSETH '07

PHOTOGRAPH BY
MEGAN HARRIS '06



LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

SERVING OTHERS IS NOT A NEW CONCEPT in the lives of St. Olaf students. "Living lives of worth and service" is an inherent part of the St. Olaf mission and one that students take seriously. On the heels of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, a small group of students, led by St. Olaf College Student Government Association President Thomas Rusert '06 and Student Senator Ishanaa

**STUDENTS REFLECT ON LIFE-CHANGING
'OLE SPRING RELIEF' EXPERIENCES IN
BILOXI, MISSISSIPPI, AND NEW ORLEANS.**

Rambachan '08, began planning "Ole Spring Relief." They spoke with fellow students about their idea to help hurricane victims in whatever way they could.

They partnered with Lutheran Disaster Response and planned everything — from transportation, lodging and food to service projects and nightly speakers — for nearly 200 St. Olaf students who agreed that this was the best way to spend their Spring Break.

On the last Saturday in March, four busloads of students and four St. Olaf staffers — Assistant Dean for Community Life and Diversity Bill Green '77, Assistant Vice President for Facilities Pete Sandberg, Dean of Students Greg Kneser and College Pastor Bruce Benson — left the Hill and drove for 22 hours to the Gulf Coast. Some stayed in Biloxi, Mississippi; others traveled on to New Orleans. It was one of the largest student relief projects organized by a liberal arts college in the United States. [CONTINUED]

**BY ERIC HUSETH '07, ROB MARTIN '06, KARL OLSON '08, ISHANA
RAMBACHAN '08, THOMAS RUSERT '06, MARTHA SCHWEHN '08, TREMAINE
VERSTEEG '07 AND VICTOR WONG '08. PHOTOGRAPHS BY MEGAN
HARRIS '06, EMILY PETERSON '06, TREMAINE VERSTEEG '07,
BILL GREEN '77 AND DAVID GONNERMAN '90.**



SATURDAY, MARCH 25

Up at 5:30 a.m., we prepared for students to arrive and moved a couple hundred pounds of food and clothing destined for hurricane victims to the front doors of Buntrock Commons. As spring relievers gathered, Pastor Benson led a commissioning service in front of Boe Chapel. My classmates held the tools with which we would be working: rakes, shovels and trash bags. We prayed that our work would do more than rebuild communities; that it would also rebuild hope in the future.

— **ROB MARTIN '06** PLEASANT PRAIRIE, WISCONSIN · MAJORS: ENGLISH AND RELIGION

MONDAY, MARCH 27

Our greatest message of hope and help to the people of New Orleans was, at first, not us or our tools — but our bus. Many mistook us for a tour group wanting to take pictures of the destruction and leave. In fact, when we greeted some of the residents, our first exchanges were quite intense. I've never seen such joy-filled faces when it registered with homeowners that this busload of students was not there to gawk but to help them start a new life. — **ERIC HUSETH '07**

PLYMOUTH, MINNESOTA · MAJORS: MUSIC AND RELIGION



The difficult thing about helping Mr. Marion Williams gut his house was that we never knew what he wanted to keep. We'd find undamaged items, like an old yearbook or photo albums, and we'd ask him if he wanted to keep them. He'd just shake his head "no" and continue on. Yet there were things we thought were clearly in need of disposal — like mud-covered, chipped teacups — that Marion would pick off our debris pile and place into his shed. That led me to think I should invest less in buying and more in bonding with my family and friends, because that was all these people had left. My biggest reward at the end of the day was when Marion, holding back tears, hugged and thanked every one of us. — **VICTOR WONG '08** LAKEVILLE, MINNESOTA ·

MAJOR: ECONOMICS, WITH A BIOMEDICAL STUDIES CONCENTRATION



I don't think any of us were prepared to deal with the chaos in D'Iberville, Mississippi, where we were sent to clean up three residential lots and debris from the harbor and Gollog's Seafood Company. Hundreds of bags of shrimp, blown out of the shrimp factory across the street, had turned into putrid sacks of orange goo after months in the wet heat. The smell was awful. There was a wrecked ship in the backyard, twisted metal and shards of glass, shingles and bricks strewn everywhere like confetti. Plastic hung from the trees, including a gigantic yellow boat cover. With the help of a small pocket knife, some adept tree climbing and many sharp tugs, the last pieces of the boat cover finally hit the ground and everyone cheered like Vikings fans after a touchdown. — **ROB MARTIN '06**

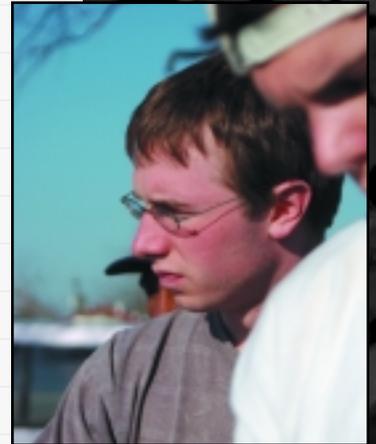
TUESDAY, MARCH 28

"For two months, I smelled death," said Quintin Kersten, the grounds foreman for Beauvoir estate in Biloxi, the retirement home of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, where we were assigned to work for the week. Quintin explained that in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, a mortuary had opened nearby and bodies spilled into the site. Dogs had to search for remains. A restaurant also blew over and rotting turkeys were scattered through Beauvoir (French for "beautiful view"). As Quintin spoke to me, his eyes welled with tears. He put it quite plainly: "The federal government forgot us." As he surveyed the land, I could see he was envisioning Beauvoir in its former glory. Where I saw sewage, he saw a fountain. Where I saw broken bricks, he saw a foundation.

— **ISHANAA RAMBACHAN '08** APPLE VALLEY, MINNESOTA

MAJORS: POLITICAL SCIENCE, ECONOMICS AND HISTORY





WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29

We worked at Ms. Kay's house today and brought along the heavy machinery. Her backyard was a jungle of fallen trees. Some of the pieces were so huge that we had to tie them to a four-wheel-drive truck and drag them through her yard to be picked up out front. I had the honor of driving the pickup during a couple of these delicate maneuvers. I was very careful not to hit Ms. Kay's fence as I went out her backyard but neglected to notice the backpacks underneath the front wheel. I ran over two digital cameras and an iPod, but at least two of those are in working order again. I also ran over one Snickers bar, but it tasted just fine, despite its reduced size. — **ROB MARTIN '06**



As I shoveled concrete slabs, corroded copper pipes, photo albums and Cabbage Patch dolls, images of Iraq and Afghanistan flashed in my mind. I realized that perhaps every day at every hour families search through rubble. I suddenly thought how callous I have been, glancing at the morning's newspaper headlines as I rushed to class, skimming over stories of devastation, desensitized to it all. Suddenly, life became clear to me. Nature causes so much pain, why must we inflict it on ourselves? — **ISHANAA RAMBACHAN '08**



This evening we attended the Vespers service at Good Shepard Lutheran Church, the church where we live in our "tent city." We contributed by teaching the four-part harmony litany we use in our home services in Boe Chapel. After the service we offered the Holden Evening Prayer, a service used much of the year at St. Olaf. Two students sang the lead parts and were accompanied by students on piano, violin, cello and oboe. It was a pretty impressive mini-orchestra on short notice, but that's what you get when you bring a bunch of Oles to Mississippi. — **ROB MARTIN '06**



THURSDAY, MARCH 30

The sore muscles, achy hands, cuts, bruises, the sunburn, the bug bites, dirty fingernails and stench we've all been carrying around this week — it's all worth it. To see the appreciation in the eyes of the residents, to hear their incredible stories, to be encouraged by their faith and hope, and embraced by their gratefulness and love, I couldn't ask for more. And to know that being exhausted at the end of the day means that we helped make someone else's burden a little lighter is deeply gratifying. — **TREMAINE VERSTEEG '07** PELLA, IOWA · MAJOR: FAMILY STUDIES



"IF I MISSED GOD IN THE OCEAN AND DESTRUCTION OF BILOXI, I SAW GOD IN MY FELLOW STUDENTS." — ISHANAA RAMBACHAN '08

FRIDAY, MARCH 31

Debris cleanup is a solitary practice. Apart from the occasional heavy and awkward objects that require combined efforts for removal, each person most often exercises some method alone, contributing in her own time to the communal heap. We could only skim the surface of the beach we cleaned, shuffling over layers and layers of buried junk. Some committed to a few square feet of sand and sat digging for long periods. Others, like me, were too impatient for small excavations and needed the regular satisfaction of moving bigger things. But we did more than chores. We were responsible for listening to the local residents, too. Responsible for receiving the things they offered to us in thanks. We served as witnesses to their grief and suffering. Even if we didn't finish a roofing job or this stretch of beach, we still offered a great deal of comfort just by being there. — **MARTHA SCHWEHN '08** VALPARAISO, INDIANA · MAJORS: RELIGION AND ENGLISH

SATURDAY, APRIL 1

We are carrying back a message of "help" from New Orleans, a devastated skeleton of a community struggling to stay alive. A large part of helping a community recover from a disaster is to understand the disaster itself. Many images will be with us for years to come. Our group traveled to the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. Walking among the trashed houses and vehicles, we came upon a water-logged SUV. There in the back seat was a teddy bear still buckled up — just as the child had left it. — **ERIC HUSETH '07**

The lives of families, friends and classmates have been blown as far and wide as the shingles on ocean-side houses. Yes, the work we do rebuilding houses and cleaning properties is valuable, but it is also extraordinarily valuable to listen to human stories so that we can share them wherever we go. We understand now what people in the Gulf Coast have gone through and what it really means to love one's neighbor. — **ROB MARTIN '06**

SUNDAY, APRIL 2

I've learned how much one's attitude determines the outcome of an experience. Whether it was picking up underwear and soggy cardboard from the beach, raking debris from abandoned properties or gutting a house with crowbars and hammers, Ole volunteers gave themselves entirely to the work at hand, and their attitude was exemplary: constructive, good-humored and optimistic. As my final year at St. Olaf draws to a close I was not expecting any more big surprises. I got one during "Ole Spring Relief." — **THOMAS RUSERT '06** BIG LAKE, MINNESOTA · MAJOR: RELIGION

As our bus pulled into St. Olaf, a spontaneous chorus of 'Um Yah Yah' broke out. Shirking off my qualms about sounding corny, I joined in. I've never felt more a part of a community. We had sacrificed together, labored together and rejoiced together. If I missed God in the ocean and destruction of Biloxi, I saw God in my fellow students. — **ISHANAA RAMBACHAN '08**

