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SUNY students learn lessons from survivors

Editor's note: Five SUNY New Paltz psychology students spent two weeks working with the Red Cross providing disaster relief in New Orleans. The students arrived Dec. 29 and spent long days serving meals to people affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

This is the third in a series of dispatches from the students - graduate student Jessica Walsh, 26, and undergraduate students Jemma Binder, 21; Zachary James Joyce, 21; Dawn Birk, 21; and Nellie Afshar, 20.

By Jemma Binder

After a 13-day deployment with the Red Cross in New Orleans, I lay in my bed exhausted and stirred by my experiences. My work has allowed me to speak intimately with clients, and gain an understanding of their situation.

Connections grew out of what my professor, Dr. James Halpern, spoke of in class as "meeting the client where the client is," which involves empathetic listening and honest presence in the moment. One client, an elderly lady, stands out from the rest as a true example of this concept in motion.

I knocked on her door with food, snacks and water in my hand, and she welcomed me into her home. Before her husband passed away, they promised one another that whoever outlived the other would continue celebrating Christmas as a testament to their love and commitment to one another. Her parlor was covered in "snow," Santas and miniature figurines. When she plugged in the lights, they flashed and one of the many Santas began to sing. Her eyes lit up at my excited smile. Giggling, she led me to the next room, where she held my hand and pointed to pictures of her seven children, telling me stories about them.

The entire time we talked, her eyes were shadowed in tears. She was hungry for interaction and someone to talk with. It struck me that she waits every day for a Red Cross worker to come to her door with sustenance and the means for conversation. She did not want me to go, and joked about kicking her son out and having me move in next door.

As I walked back to the ERV (emergency relief vehicle), I thought about the many times a client has mentioned that one of the meals they are receiving from the Red Cross is going to their neighbor who is unable or unwilling to get assistance themselves.

I have witnessed much caring and kindness in the people of New Orleans. By helping out a neighbor or friend, they are doing what they can in this disastrous situation. I was blessed to be part of this healing process.

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