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No words to describe New Orleans

Student volunteer says help still badly needed

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

The students received Red Cross training before they were deployed. This is the second 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 Dawn Birk

My mom called me after my first day of work as an American Red Cross volunteer, and the first question she asked was, "What did it look like?" I tried to explain to her that there are no words to describe what I saw, but she could not understand. I tried to draw a picture in her mind with words, but after explaining what I saw, I realized that the only way you can understand is to see the disaster with your own eyes.

Every morning when I go out on my route and look at the remnants of the disaster, my eyes fill with tears and I can't believe this really happened. I remember I came to New Orleans to help others, and I quickly pull myself together and focus on having high energy and a big smile as I meet the people.

These people are truly amazing - they lost everything and they still have hope. One man came up to me and was wearing a blue shirt with rust stains all over it and a pair of gray pants, and I will never forget his sad, crystal-blue eyes. This man was living in an apartment that had water almost to the ceiling. He explained that the clothes he was wearing were the only thing he had. Everything was lost and all that remains is a dark, mold-infested hole.

The most important thing I can say is that these people truly need our help. Many of the people I serve depend on the one meal a day they get from the Red Cross. The disaster is not gone, it is not all rainbows and butterflies. There are people suffering all over New Orleans and they still need our help.

[TOP](#)

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