

January 20, 2006

## Mercy mission completed

*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 returned Jan. 11. They spent long days serving meals to people affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.*

This is the last 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 Jessica Walsh

For the Times Herald-Record

Every night, I find myself sitting here in front of a journal full of blank, white pages, searching for words to describe the widespread devastation that I have seen. The images portrayed in the media over the last four months do not serve justice to the destruction I have witnessed.

Homes abandoned. Water lines. Warped furniture. Piles of Sheetrock. Black mold. Blue-tarped roofs. Tent cities. Cars lining the streets. Desolation. Apocalyptic. Ghost towns. Lost souls. Faith enduring.

With every sunset, the catastrophic aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita becomes a silent backdrop. After recovering from the initial phases of shock and disillusion, residents are striving to restore a sense of normalcy in their lives as they return to work and school.

Every day I drove around the city distributing meals, and had the opportunity to talk with the residents. By the end of the day, I was filled with frustration and hopelessness as I breathed in their hardship, knowing that the services and resources available are slowly dwindling.

The effort to establish and restore long-term resources has begun. But the process is gradual, considering that the city, on all levels, was deeply affected by the devastation.

Despite the destruction, I am in awe of the resiliency of the people. At first, I was hesitant to ask individuals, "How are you?" but it quickly became one of the highlights of my day, with my favorite response being, "Blessed."

As the plane descended, arriving home in New York, I was overwhelmed by my emotions.

Not realizing it, every day while I drove from one neighborhood to another, I had detached myself from this external reality. This desolate landscape that had initially appeared foreign became reality.

I felt guilty, knowing that I was coming home to resume my normal, daily routine, while miles away, the residents of New Orleans will continue their struggle for years to come.

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