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## **SUNY program studies effect of disasters**

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NEW PALTZ &mdash; Audrey Sheridan's brother is a firefighter who made his first run with the New York Fire Department on Sept. 11, 2001.

Zak Joyce spent two weeks handing out hot meals to thousands of New Orleans residents a few months after Hurricane Katrina hit.

They represent two ends of a program at the State University of New York at New Paltz. The disaster studies minor is part of the school's Institute for Disaster Mental Health.

The program is entering its third year and focuses on how natural or man-made disasters affect individuals, communities, organizations and the nation.

Sheridan is in her second week of classes. And Joyce is in his second week working for the Red Cross after completing the program last year.

A Brooklyn native, Sheridan said she was drawn to the program by her family's experiences. Her brother, Andrew, was a probational firefighter in New York City when the planes hit. His first run was to the World Trade Center. Her brother-in-law was working on the 87th floor of one of the towers.

Neither family member was caught in the collapse. But both, she said, have scars.

"I saw how it affected them," Sheridan said. "I saw how it was hard for them to go by the scene. It's hard for them to see it. It's hard for them to see people talking about it."

Joyce was one of five New Paltz students who traveled to New Orleans in December to work as a Red Cross volunteers.

"We must have fed 6,000 people in the matter of two weeks," Joyce said. "We were averaging 600 meals per day. Absolutely incredible. The city was still in great need. My biggest impression was how nice people were and how destroyed their city was and how upbeat everybody was even though they weren't getting the full attention they deserved anymore."

Joyce is working with the Ulster County Red Cross chapter, learning how to provide disaster-related services and how to teach others to do the same.

The institute is the brainchild of psychology professor James Halpern, who provided counseling and other services at ground zero in the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

In addition to the disaster studies program, the institute has hosted an annual conference and offers training to local volunteers.

"I am surprised that we have done as much as we have done over these last two years," Halpern said. "... We said, 'Here is what the institute is going to do' and we've done it all &mdash; and we keep growing."

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On the Web

To learn more about the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at the State University of New York at New Paltz, go to [www.newpaltz.edu/idmh](http://www.newpaltz.edu/idmh)

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