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NKU group reflects on Katrina project

Faculty, students help Miss. town cope with devastation

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

HIGHLAND HEIGHTS - As Northern Kentucky University's school year ends, some of the most enduring memories for 14 students will not be of the school's campus but of tiny Moss Point, Miss.

In January, the group was part of a service-learning project to help the town cope with and recover from Hurricane Katrina. Moss Point, sitting on the Gulf Coast with a population of around 18,000 people, was destroyed by the 2005 hurricane.

Jimmie Manning, a communications professor, led the group.

ADVERTISEMENT "Our goal was to take communication theory about social support and use it to help the citizens understand what they have accomplished for each other and to help minimize emotional frustrations about what happened during Katrina," Manning said. "We also conducted an organizational culture audit of the school system there, specifically focusing on strengths in the educational system, strengths in the communication system and possibilities for retention of teachers."

For graduate student Aimee Shandy, the project was a return home and a chance to give back.

"My family is from out west, but I lived in Hattiesburg when I was in junior high and my mom always said she thought the kindest people in the world lived in Mississippi," Shandy said.

"Having the opportunity to go back and give back was something I couldn't pass up."

Shandy was in charge of conducting the organizational culture audit of the local school system.

"We went to do an organizational audit of the school district, which has been suffering from high faculty turnover and a declining student population since Hurricane Katrina," Shandy said. "The goal was to help determine the root cause of this, and possibly curb the problem."

She said it was education she couldn't have gotten in the classroom.

"It gave me real insight into the dynamics and interconnectedness of communities and organizations," she said. "It can be frustrating. We were up late many nights trying to regroup and plan for the next day. But it was important for this school district, and hopefully what we did will help them in the long run."

"As far as how it will benefit me, I think just knowing how an audit is conducted, and the type of information that is valuable, and how you're not always looking for what you think you're looking, and you don't always find what you expect to find, as long as you keep your mind - and eyes and ears - open."

Back in Highland Heights with time to reflect, Shandy said she thinks Moss Point will be all right.

"We got the sense that the community had grown significantly since Katrina. Not in numbers, but in spirit and camaraderie."

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