

FROM THE PRESIDENT

MARK SCHULMAN



Sheila and I returned recently from Mississippi after a five-day trip to join Goddard community members in the Katrina People-to-People Project (P2P). You can read about the project at: fc.goddard.edu/KatrinaUpdate/. As the project homepage tells it:

“In late summer, soon after Hurricane Katrina swept ashore, members of the Goddard community came together and organized the People-to-People Project. Consistent with the college’s historical commitment to social justice, community members committed to work side by side with citizens and community groups on the Gulf Coast. We understood that these communities were hurt, not merely by the storm’s powerful winds and waves, but by longstanding environmental degradation, racism, hierarchy and poverty.

“Over the past weeks, P2P members reached out to citizens and communities in order to find meaningful ways the college can support their efforts to reconstruct their lives and communities on a more just and sustainable basis. We traveled to conferences and communities and asked community members and leaders alike how and where we might best support them.

“We focused our efforts in Mississippi, which, like Louisiana, was hard hit by the storm but has received little attention or support. For example, approximately 20,000 Katrina evacuees were relocated to Hattiesburg, Miss.; many are scattered throughout the area, some are in FEMA trailer camps in neighboring small towns, others are looking for work and more permanent homes. Our attention was also drawn by Hattiesburg’s history of self-activity, most notably the efforts of the women and men who led the voting rights drives of the 1960s. Finally, we were encouraged by our discussions with local citizens and organizations that welcomed our efforts. As a result of these experiences, we decided to work primarily with Habitat for Humanity, a national group with a proven track record in Hattiesburg.”

But these words cannot convey the realities of what we did and what we saw in Mississippi and New Orleans (click on the links from the P2P homepage to see what some project members have offered). For all of the thirty-plus Goddard folks who went south to work, to learn and (in a real sense with several different aspects) to witness, the experience

was overwhelming, transformative and intense.

I’ll not try in this brief account to provide a full rendition of what Sheila and I saw, heard, smelled and felt. Suffice it to say we were deeply moved by working with our Goddard friends as well as local Hattiesburg volunteers in building a house, and we were disturbed by what we became aware of in Gulfport and New Orleans. We had seen the photos and TV images, but standing on a street on the Mississippi coast and seeing nothing but devastation in all directions, where before there had been a living community, was a completely different experience.

That is in part what I mean by the “witness” comment: we know that there has been little done to rebuild in many areas—we saw it and we talked with people about it. As part of our commitment to social justice, Goddard needs to insist on just outcomes to the continuing crisis. Which we will do.

This first phase of the Katrina P2P Project, with three work teams that have been to the Gulf Coast and returned

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to tell their stories, engaged us, people to people, so we could give and we could learn. The next phase will involve not only our efforts to extend the gift of our labor and our compassion (working in Hattiesburg and other areas) but also our attempt to understand, deeply and radically (in the sense of “to the roots”), what this natural and unnatural disaster has meant, means and will mean.

I want you to know how proud we should all be of our community-wide participation in this initiative: from the Board that funded it, through the volunteers who went south, to those who stayed behind and picked up the undone work of those who left. In doing what we could with grace, humility and passion, Goddard has shown what it is made of. In desiring to learn and to grow as a community through the lessons the people of the Gulf Coast teach us, Goddard will show what it can be.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Schulman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.