



1609

NO BREACH OF FAITH

Bard Student Volunteers Are Committed to Reviving New Orleans

Before Katrina, it was known to revelers from all over the world as the “Big Easy.” Since the catastrophic storms of 2005, however, nothing has been easy for New Orleans, which nearly three years later is still struggling to get back on its feet.

Soon after the disaster, thousands of volunteers—from all over the country and around the world—flocked to the beleaguered city when the federal government was slow to respond. Among them were 126 Bard College students, mobilized by New Orleans native Stephen Tremaine '07, who traveled down during winter break that January. Unlike many others, the Bard volunteers have maintained a consistent presence in the city; to date, 355 Bard students have lent their time, energy, and expertise to various recovery projects. More important, they have made—and continue to make—a significant, quantifiable difference.

“They’ve accomplished an enormous amount,” says Hal Roark, executive director of the Broadmoor Development Corporation, who has worked with successive arrivals of Bard volunteers in his section of the city. “I’ve been incredibly impressed, not just by how smart they are, but by how they apply themselves to any cause or goal that we need to further the neighborhood along. Their contributions have run the gamut from the intellectual work of policy planning to hands-on house gutting. I rely on them; I know I can really depend on them.”

The residential neighborhood of Broadmoor was so badly damaged by flooding that city officials initially considered razing its 2,400 homes and reducing it to a public park. Determined to prove their neighborhood’s viability, Broadmoor residents organized. In June 2006, the Broadmoor Improvement Association reached out to Bard volunteers,



Stephen Tremaine '07

Harvard Kennedy School graduate students, and PlanReady, a software company in Silicon Valley, to develop a geographical information systems (GIS) map and digital database to track the status of each Broadmoor property. Bard students conducted interviews with residents, took damage reports, and photographed every building and lot in the district. The data bank they assembled included minutely detailed information that was vital to community organizers, city and government officials, and agencies and businesses that were willing to provide funding. Broadmoor has since become a beacon of grassroots community revitalization, with approximately 70 percent of its homes restored and repopulated.

“Bard students have made a tremendous difference in the recovery of Broadmoor,” says Douglas Ahlers, director of The Broadmoor Project at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School. “The information they have collected is critical to the Broadmoor leadership’s ability to identify the areas in the neighborhood that have the most need, and to develop strategies to target resources appropriately.”

Quite impressive, considering that it all started with a coffee can for donations in the Bertelsmann Campus Center.

“Yes, it was nothing more strategic than that,” says Tremaine, who spearheaded Bard’s volunteer and fund-raising efforts in 2005. “Standing on tables in the campus center, trying to collect whatever pocket change people had. In the first couple of months we raised \$16,000.”

But when that first wave of Bard students arrived in the ruined city in January 2006, they gradually came to realize that, although they could raise money indefinitely and physically take part in the clearing away of rubble and debris (which they did), it would be far more effective to respond with the unique resources of an academic institution than as simply a coalition of well-meaning individuals.

“Sure, we could help somebody fix their home in a devastated neighborhood, but that is not the last stage in the process,” says Tremaine, who now directs the Bard Urban Studies in New Orleans Program. “The government has to approve the rebuilding of that home. In many cases, we worked on properties for six days, and on the seventh day the city inspector would come by and red-tag it to be bulldozed even though it seemed to be in perfectly fine shape. So there really seemed to be another problem there. It brought up questions less of individual properties than of neighborhoods and communities, and the ecological and sociological stature of certain places. Why were communities with lower tax bases receiving fewer resources in the recovery? Why were communities in which the need was demonstrably greater receiving fewer resources to come back?”

These were precisely the kinds of questions that needed to be considered for any rebuilding efforts to be meaningful, and precisely the kinds of questions that a liberal arts college and its students were qualified to address. By examining the depth and complexity of New Orleans’ recovery process from an academic point of view, Bard volunteers understood that they needed to work in a way that was systemic, one that would draw upon their intellectual capital and achieve something more effective and longer lasting than a Band-Aid.

That led to their involvement in the creation of the GIS map in Broadmoor. Every six months, Bard volunteers resurvey the district and update the GIS map data. Their work has now expanded into individual case management for residents in need of social services and other aid.

“I saw how information is an agent in community service, how it empowers neighborhood associations,” says SongSoo Kim '09, who collected data for the map. “As college students who deal with reading and information all the time, this is our specialty, what college has trained us to do . . . to share this information in discussions and dialogues with community members was probably the most fitting work we could do.”

Not that Kim and her fellow volunteers were unaware of some of the ironies, subtleties, or complications of their relationships with the locals.

“It was easy to just think about it in an academic setting; it’s much harder to be in New Orleans, thinking critically and doing work that’s productive for both the community and yourself,” says Kim. “You can think, ‘Oh, I’m gonna save the world!’ and get into that kind of bleeding-heart humanitarianism that’s blinded by one’s privilege. But you’ve got to look at your romantic notions versus concrete reality.”



Those sentiments are echoed by Ari Braverman '08, who plans to stay in New Orleans “indefinitely” after having made a third trip down this summer. Of her initial visit in 2006, she says, “Going in there as a college student was kind of a fraught thing for me. The dangerous mind-set is, ‘Oh, we’re here to save you’— the thing is to not have some savior mentality, to listen to what other people have to say. I tried to be as mindful as possible, and not make assumptions about people.”

Fortunately, in Broadmoor the students found a well-organized community that was willing to take charge of its own narrative—a community that was able to exercise its autonomy and tell the volunteers what it needed. And the successive rounds of Bard contingents responded in ways that were helpful and appropriate.

“The Bard students are well liked, well received, and thoroughly embraced by the community,” says Ahlers. “The genuine desire to listen to the residents has become the basis for trust, and also for friendship.”

“They set a very high bar here,” Roark concurs. “I hope we can have Bard students coming down here for the next 10 years.”

(Left) Hal Roark, executive director of the Broadmoor Development Corporation; (center) Shannon Wells, case manager for the Broadmoor Development Corporation; (right) Tonya Foster, teaching Bard High School Early College courses in New Orleans



These students were among the group that made the trip from Bard to New Orleans in the summer of 2008: (standing, left to right) Dave Polett '10, Dev Castra '09, Emily Wolff '10, Anna Putnam '09, Elizabeth Crawford '10, Cassie Pruyne '10, and Kathleen "Kaycee" Filson '11; (kneeling, left to right) Rebekah Radna '09, Allison Reeves '09, Thomas "Alex" Davis '09, Lindsay St. Onge '11, and Alison Sickler '09.

That may well prove to be the case, as Bard's presence in New Orleans shows no sign of abating. In addition to their close collaboration with Broadmoor, Bard students have been active throughout the Crescent City, organizing and/or participating in myriad programs and activities. Among these have been the launching of an urban studies program at Xavier University; the introduction of an accredited early college program, modeled on Bard High School Early College in New York, in several public schools; and Bard-sponsored, student-organized courses to explore the academic issues surrounding post-Katrina recovery—including a seminar in Annandale with guest lecturer Kristina Ford, former director of city planning in New Orleans. (See facing page.)

"Once you've gone there, you have a connection to the place," asserts Grace Dwyer '10, who helped to gut an abandoned elementary school in Broadmoor and returned as a teacher's aide the following winter. "It's important that Bard students keep on working to maintain their relationship with New Orleans—not only for the communities we work in, but for our own education as well."

—Mikhail Horowitz and Jennifer Wai-Lan Huang

Contributors to the Bard in New Orleans programs include Caroline Keller Winter, Theodosia Nolan, John W. and Bertie M. Deming Foundation, Broadmoor Development Corporation, Amacord Foundation, Kenneth McCarthy, and several anonymous donors. Other support has come from Bard students, faculty, and staff assisting the visiting students each January, and numerous members of the Board of Governors of the Bard–St. Stephen's Alumni/ae Association, who supported four fellowships in the Urban Studies Program at Xavier University during the summer of 2008 in honor of Louisiana native Jessica Kemm '74 and her service to Bard as director of alumni/ae affairs, 1999–2008. Visit www.bard.edu/neworleans to learn more about Bard's projects in New Orleans and how to donate.

Bard's New Orleans Initiatives

These are some of the projects and activities that Bard students, faculty, and staff are coordinating and/or participating in.

TLS New Orleans Project: This Trustee Leader Scholar project coordinates Bard student volunteers traveling to New Orleans every winter intersession and summer.

McDonogh 35 High School Tutoring: A summer remedial program, designed to stabilize a school in danger of closing, for students at risk of failing standardized testing.

Broadmoor GIS Mapping: Bard students, in collaboration with the Broadmoor Improvement Association and Harvard Kennedy School of Government volunteers, created a comprehensive geographic information systems (GIS) map to detail the revitalization of the neighborhood. Working with Columbia University's Spatial Information Design Lab, Bard students produced and distributed a guidebook for community mapping projects in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans.

Children's Expressive Arts Project (CEAP): Biannual arts-based workshops with children in grades K through 8 at the James M. Singleton Charter School in Central City.

Andrew Wilson Elementary School: Rehabilitation of a neglected elementary school in Broadmoor. When the school was successfully reopened, Bard students worked in classrooms as teachers' aides.

New Orleans Neighborhood Data Forum: In conjunction with the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, this forum provided neighborhood associations and recovery groups across New Orleans with resources, information, and guidance on issues of data collection, analysis, and usage. More than 80 neighborhood leaders attended the event.

Bard-Broadmoor Fellowships: Each year, three exceptional Bard student volunteers will be provided with stipends to work on case management and advocacy for Broadmoor residents in need.

Bard New Orleans Summer Camp: In collaboration with CEAP, Bard Men's Basketball, and YMCA, this day camp at the Wilson Elementary School operated for five weeks in July and August, run by Bard volunteers.

Bard Urban Studies in New Orleans Program: Housed at Xavier University, this intensive eight-week academic program investigates notions of urbanism, ecology, and social policy. Students take two seminar-style courses and intern up to 40 hours per week.

Bard Early College in New Orleans Program: A series of tuition-free, college credit-bearing courses offered in New Orleans public schools. Classes meet weekly for a 10-week period.



John Driebergen '10 and Christina Marcantonio '11, participants in the Bard/Broadmoor Community Development Fellowship