



SBP note: Journey for Change: Empowering Youth Through Global Service, a nonprofit organization that provides service opportunities for at-risk children from Brooklyn, NY, volunteered April 11-14 with the St. Bernard Project. Founded by Malaak Compton-Rock (wife of comedian Chris Rock), this group of 30 students and their chaperones worked on three SBP homes, hanging drywall and mudding.

The Journey for Change students spent two weeks in South Africa in August 2008, volunteering with orphaned and vulnerable children in shanty towns. Compton-Rock invited their South African coordinator, Cornelius Themba Xulu, to accompany the students on their next major service project in New Orleans. The following is his account of his American volunteering experience.

A fulfilling service experience in New Orleans by Cornelius Themba Xulu



When I landed at the Louis Armstrong Airport, it seemed like everything had gone back to normal after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. I had just traveled 17 hours from Johannesburg, South Africa to team up with the “Journey for Change: Empowering Youth Through Global Service” kids with the St. Bernard Project. It was not until we drove around the Lower Ninth Ward that I saw just how much the ordinary people of New Orleans had suffered. Most houses that are still standing are marked with crosses documenting how many lives were lost in that particular home. It was sobering to see empty lots with only a concrete slab to commemorate what used to be a family home for many generations. The effects of a long flight were erased by the gratitude I felt for the opportunity to help people get back into their homes, one house at a time.

Our group was responsible for three houses, and I was assigned to a group that worked on Miss Lisa Vaccarella’s house. She has such an incredible spirit about her that it was so refreshing to sit and listen to her story during our lunch breaks. She cooked us jambalaya and shared her experience with us with so much gratitude for our service. This was a very fulfilling experience for me, partly because helping

Miss Lisa get back into her home is a tangible, relatively short term and achievable goal. We all knew that if we just worked as hard as we could and many other volunteers after us continued to work as hard as they could, then Miss Lisa would soon be in her home. Even though the completed house will not replace all that she lost, our goal will be achieved.

Sometimes when I serve back at home, the needs can be so vast and diverse that my efforts do not always lead to a clearly defined end product. At times I just push up my sleeves and give, not knowing whether the people you are trying to help will one day emerge victorious. I know that educating children is essential to fighting the poverty that remains endemic fifteen years after the birth of our democracy. HIV/Aids claimed an estimated 350,000 lives in 2007 alone, according to the Global Health Reporting.org. The emotional and mental needs of individuals are a matter of urgency but are often overlooked. Limited resources and manpower can make these problems overwhelming. Unlike in New Orleans where I left knowing



that there was someone coming to complete where I had left off, back at home, there are days when I go to bed unsure if the people I served will see the dawn of a new day.



I am very grateful to Journey for Change and St. Bernard Project for a chance to serve; I am walking away knowing that I have played a part in improving someone's life. I look forward to following Miss Lisa's story on Facebook where she will be posting pictures of the progress on her house.