

2009

Service Scholarship: The Underutilized Component in Meeting Social Needs

Tammy S. Smith

Florida State University, tss08c@fsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces>

Recommended Citation

Smith, Tammy S. (2009) "Service Scholarship: The Underutilized Component in Meeting Social Needs," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol2/iss1/10>

This Research From the Field is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

On Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana, staggering New Orleans with a 22-foot storm surge. The levees broke and the city began to flood. When Katrina finally blew itself out in the Midwest, 1,836 people in eight states were dead and 705 were missing, making Katrina the fifth deadliest hurricane in U.S. history. Katrina's damages (estimated at \$110 billion) and evacuations (between 1 and 2 million) were the largest in U.S. history (www.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/reports/tech-report-200501z.pdf; see also, www.cnn.com/2005/WEATHER/08/31/.katrina.impact/index.html).

Service Scholarship: The Underutilized Component in Meeting Social Needs

Tammy S. Smith

Many academic institutions already embrace volunteerism as part of their institutional philosophy (Hinck & Brandell, 2000), either by requiring that students take a course in it or by incorporating it into the curriculum. Volunteer experience, however, is not the same as a carefully planned service program designed to support community stakeholder goals and educators' learning objectives while expanding student knowledge, all with an evaluative component. Volunteering provides numerous benefits to both the volunteer and those served that can be incorporated into the curriculum. Service-learning fills a need that traditional courses cannot (Fong, 2005; Gronski & Pigg, 2000).

As college students prepare to enter a world where terrorism, catastrophic disasters, poverty, crime, and drug abuse are prevalent, service-learning in the curriculum can help develop a well-rounded student through civic research and participation in community-driven service projects that address community needs.

I was fortunate enough to participate in one such project, a Hurricane Katrina relief effort that changed both my perception of learning and how I apply knowledge. In the fall of 2005, I began the professional undergraduate social work program at The University of Alabama. Only days into the semester, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, destroying whole communities and

causing unprecedented relocation of residents. Of all the statistics I have seen the most astounding was the number of houses lost, 275,000, more than 10 times that of any previous U.S. natural disaster (2005).

But even more alarming to many Americans than the statistics, grim as they were, was discovering that our federal and local governments and their agencies were unable to meet the needs of the stricken. (U.S. House of Representatives, 2006). What a traumatic introduction to my profession and what a shock to someone who had assumed that my country and my government were prepared for anything that came our way!

In my first social work practice course, our professor encouraged our group to help fill this gap by volunteering in the response effort. Our chance to contribute would come almost immediately when Volunteers of America requested that students from the University conduct needs assessments in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, a small fishing village (population 2,313) in Mobile County, most of whose residents are Asian immigrants, all of whom were ravaged by Katrina. You may not have visited the tiny town on Mobile Bay but chances are very good, no matter where you live, you have eaten shrimp, crabs, or oysters from Bayou La Batre.

The Asian population is attributable to a large influx of Vietnamese immigrants following

the Vietnam War. Bayou la Batre was a popular destination for such immigrants because it fosters a shrimping industry similar to that of Vietnam.

After weeks of planning, several narrow escapes from cancellation due to logistics, and many hours of work by a number of people, 16 students from The University of Alabama and two from the University of Montevallo in nearby Shelby County arrived in Bayou La Batre on November 4, 2005, to assess the population's needs after the storm.

The needs assessments involved home visits to complete questionnaires with residents about their immediate and long term needs as a result of the hurricane. The questionnaires focused on housing and medical needs, as well as a compilation of a long list of household and personal supplies. Volunteers of America used the 120 completed assessments to secure a \$50,000 grant from the Wachovia Rebuilding South Alabama Fund to meet some of the community's needs (N. Simms, personal communication, June 6, 2009).

The experience in Bayou La Batre provided my peers and me a new consciousness about human suffering and our mutual obligation to one another. Despite cultural sensitivity training and research on Vietnamese Americans and others of Asian descent that resulted in a cultural handbook for use by our group, many of us were shocked that our first thoughts of these hardworking, economically disadvantaged individuals were stereotypes. In the end, we felt sure of our cultural growth and understanding of our new friends.

In the field, however, much of that information seemed irrelevant. People looked me right in the eyes, with almost a hopeful plea, instead of the downward gaze expected based on our research. No one invited us into their homes, probably because their homes were in such poor condition, so we didn't have to worry about the expectation of removing our shoes. We expected the men to represent their households by answering our questions, as this is what our readings and research informed us. However, most of the men were not present as they were out working or attempting to find work. I found it especially disturbing when the interpreter working with FEMA, himself an Asian immigrant, declared that the shrimping jobs were

once again available, but no one wanted to work because they preferred instead to receive federal assistance. Our own observations were at odds with his assertion. In actuality, I wondered how many of these newly immigrated residents even knew of the available assistance, as the brochures we saw delivered to Bayou La Batre residents were in English (for an example of one such brochure, go to http://www.mcema.net/pdf/disaster_assistance.pdf).

We also noted a clear economic divide while in the community. Many of the immigrants we met continued to live in houses that were in poor, unsafe condition, some without electricity, and others without appliances or intact roofs. Despite these circumstances, the residents were dedicated to remaining in their homes and in the community. Less than a mile away, we saw upscale homes already repaired, debris removed from the yards, and life back to normal. This disparity in ability to recover had nothing to do with the poor residents' desire to restore their homes and lives to normalcy. Rather, the disparity was grounded in their relative poverty.

Striking visual evidence of the storm damage was apparent in the wooded area near the inter-coastal waterway; shrimp boats were perched in the branches of trees. I had never seen a 40-foot ship sitting upright on dry land until the trip to Bayou La Batre. The boats belonged to the immigrants, many of whom didn't have the insurance coverage to rescue, repair, or re-launch them. For simple lack of funds, the boats remained in the woods for months until a grant from the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund paid for their removal (Barry, 2006; Gaillard, 2007). As 80 percent of Bayou La Batre's economy is linked to the seafood industry, which also contributes millions to the area's annual economy, the financial impact of these vessels being grounded was significant for the immigrant owners as well as the local and area economies (Gaillard, 2007).

One person who knows much about the poor residents in Bayou La Batre is Dr. Regina Benjamin, President Obama's nominee for surgeon general. Benjamin has managed a healthcare clinic in Bayou La Batre for several years. There is no doubt that she has strong opinions about the treatment of this nation's poor, as evidenced by comments in her nomination acceptance speech. Dr. Benjamin said that "for years I've worked to

find resources to sustain a doctor's office that treats patients without health insurance or the ability to pay out of their pockets" (The White House, 2009). She reportedly used a considerable amount of her own money to reconstruct a clinic that served poor Bayou La Batre residents after Katrina destroyed the original facility (Romero, 2009). Simply put, from this experience, I am now fully also aware of how poverty can take its toll without any fault on the part of those in its grips.

Probably one of the most valuable lessons I learned from this experience was that nobody knows the community better than the people who live there. I've heard this from a few professors since Bayou La Batre, but I really learned it from the brave residents of the small fishing community. Amid all the chaos, confusion, and destruction, there was still a sense of community that was evident during the time we worked in the Bayou. The needs assessment recognized the residents as the most knowledgeable about their own needs. I am proud to have been a part of the project.

While the community benefited to some extent from our efforts, the relationship was definitely mutually beneficial. Both the students and the professors gained invaluable insights into an impoverished community's needs. In addition, most, if not all, of us considered the government assistance to the immigrants of Bayou La Batre to be inexcusably inadequate. Just as the reader is not necessarily able to appreciate the magnitude of Bayou La Batre's situation after Katrina without having been there, students who simply read about impoverished neighborhoods, at risk individuals, or vulnerable populations cannot truly comprehend the human experience of poverty, vulnerability, confusion, fear, lack of knowledge, political tactics, and the sheer panic over uncertainty about the future. Here the old saying, "You had to be there," takes on new significance.

References

- Barry, D. (2006, June 9). 100-ton symbols of a recovery still suspended. Retrieved March 10, 2009, from http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/09/us/09highway.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print.
- Building Online*, (2005). Retrieved August 1, 2009, from <http://www.buildingonline.com/news/viewnews.pl?id=4469>.
- Fong, R. (2005). The future of multicultural social work. *Advances in Social Work*, 6(1), 43-50.
- Gaillard, F. (2007). After the storms: Tradition and change in Bayou La Batre. *Journal of American History*, 94, 856-862.
- Gronski, R., & Pigg, K. (2000). University and community collaboration: Experiential learning in human services. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(5), 781-792.
- Hinck, S.S., & Brandell, M.E. (2000). The relationship between institutional support and campus acceptance of academic service-learning. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(5), 868-881.
- Romero, F. (2009). Regina Benjamin: Obama's surgeon general pick. Retrieved July 18, 2009, from <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1910205,00.html>.
- The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2009, July 13). Retrieved July 21, 2009, from http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-The-President-In-Announcement-Of-US-Surgeon-General/.
- U.S. House of Representatives. (2006). *A failure of initiative: Final report of the select bipartisan committee to investigate the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina* (H. Rpt. 109-377). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Wachovia Rebuilding South Alabama Fund. (2006, Spring). *Community Endowment*, 5(2), 3.

About the Author

Tammy S. Smith is a graduate student at Florida State University. She can be reached at tss08c@fsu.edu.