

Howard Students Head South to Continue Katrina Cleanup

Contributed by Jamisha Purdy - Black College Wire
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Alternative spring break project grows in popularity

For the third consecutive year, hundreds of Howard University students forfeited their personal spring break plans and boarded buses heading to the Gulf Coast the week of March 16 to assist in hurricane rebuilding efforts.

"I'm excited to spend my spring break making a difference in a community that has been under distress for the last three years," said Katia McCranny, 21, a junior classics major.

"I haven't been to New Orleans post-Katrina so I really don't know what I'm going to see," said McCranny who visited the city during Mardi Gras as part of a high school trip. "Last time, I went it was bright and exciting."

McCranny is one of more than 500 students who boarded the 10 buses lined up outside Cramton Auditorium. With their luggage taking over the sidewalk, students began trickling into the auditorium to receive their marching orders.

"I'm a little apprehensive about being on the bus for 24 hours, but besides that, I'm ready to get there," McCranny said. "I'm ready to be there now."

The buses were scheduled to depart at noon, but were delayed by late arrivals and efforts to arrange additional transportation for volunteers.

"Everything is not going to go as smoothly as we would like it to go, but it will pass so quickly that we won't even know," President H. Patrick Swygert told the volunteers.

Students will spend four days assisting in the rebuilding of New Orleans through housing construction, environmental cleanup, legal assistance and tutoring. The theme of this year's Alternative Spring Break is "Unfinished Business."

Although Hurricane Katrina-related issues have faded from the frontline of media attention, Howard students still consider the revival of New Orleans a "top priority" as residents continue to face issues including crime, housing, high unemployment rates and demographic changes.

"This is a serious situation," said Felicia Thompson, 20. "The only time we hear about it is when another year's anniversary rolls around, but there is still so much to do."

As the 2007 Alternative Spring Break co-coordinator and this year's co-chair of the team leaders, 20-year-old Tylon Axson knows the firsthand benefits of the trip.

"I realize I'm not able to rebuild every house," Axson said. "But one house at a time, one brick at a time, those are the

things that make a difference."

Thompson, a first-time volunteer, said she does not expect to see a significant difference in the condition of the city.

"I expect the worst," Thompson said. "I expect to go there and for it to look like the hurricane just hit."

The non-traditional spring break trip has become popular at Howard. Since Howard's first trip to New Orleans, applications to volunteer have tripled. This year nearly 800 students submitted applications.

"Every year the ASB Planning Committee is put in a position where we must be faithful and look to God to be our provider," said fundraising chair Gabrielle Ward.

Gerald Ashby, 20, ASB coordinator, said the committee had no maximum capacity for the trip and tried to accommodate everyone.

"There are multiple factors," Ashby said. "We want to make sure meaningful work gets done as well as being able to feed and provide shelter for everyone. It costs a lot of money to take 800 people anywhere."

The all-expenses-paid trip includes meals, transportation and lodging, mostly funded by the committee's fundraising efforts.

"As the student volunteers, planning members, and Chapel look to find resources to provide to the participants, it can become a stressful and daunting task," Ward said.

Fundraising efforts continued Sunday with the WHUR 96.3 FM Radio-thon, totaling \$56,000 in donations. Students also canvassed Georgia Avenue with buckets asking for donations.

The trip is sponsored by Howard's Rankin Andrew Memorial Chapel under the direction of Dean Bernard Richardson. "I thank the committee for the long hours they put in to make this a reality," Richardson told the students assembled in Cramton Auditorium. Last year, ABC News named the volunteers "Persons of the Week."

While they waited, students asked Swygert what he would miss about Howard after he retires at the end of the academic year. "I'm going to miss being as close to you as I am as president," Swygert responded, adding that he would continue to be present at convocation ceremonies.

"Next year, if you happen to see someone in the back waving, that will be me," he added, which drew applause and a standing ovation.

Before the student volunteers went outside, Richardson asked them to stand to recite a pledge: "This trip is not about me. It's not about my organization. It's about the people of New Orleans."

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