

Mission to New Orleans, Louisiana

With the youth group of my home parish, Saint Catherine of Siena, I embarked on the eight-hour car journey to New Orleans, Louisiana. I didn't know what to expect from this week of my summer vacation. I'd never been to New Orleans or on a mission trip before, so I was excited, but also nervous of the unknown. I *did* know that we were going to serve at three locations and help wherever we were needed during the week. I went in with an open mind, ready to take on any challenges of the week.

On the first day, I volunteered at PACE (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly). I sat with a woman named Helen as she ordered her breakfast. I joined her in her morning exercises at the table. We talked, laughed, and shared stories, even though she told the same story about the power going out in the building and how she had to get picked up early. She thought the whole situation was the funniest thing, and every time she retold the story, she laughed and smiled the same way, and I did as well. After breakfast, it was time to say my goodbye as I headed to the upper level of the building. I helped a kind elderly lady with dementia downstairs as we were setting up to pray the Rosary. I stayed with her as we prayed and led her back upstairs and helped her settle back into her room.

On the next day, my group served the underprivileged at the Rebuild Center, a haven for the homeless to get a warm meal, clean shower, find jobs, homes, and just get shelter from the heat of Louisiana. I cleaned showers, filed papers, prepared lunch, and talked with the community. I talked with one woman named Mary Alice, and she told me her story and how she has been homeless since 2003. She told me how she used to live in the park and how her only friend at the time was a squirrel she named Henry. She found the Rebuild Center, and she is almost on her way to having an apartment for herself.

On Wednesday, I assisted at KIPP Believe College Prep Middle School. School starts two weeks early so the kids can be on track with the others in the school district. I helped teachers set up their classrooms for the school year and did heavy lifting for them. We came back to St. Jane de Chantal, the

parish that graciously hosted us. We helped garden, clean and organize the kitchen and bathrooms, and do more heavy lifting.

We wrapped up our week visiting the Blue Stand. The Blue Stand is a little gathering place in the middle of a very poor neighborhood where meals are cooked, and extra clothes are stored. We walked around the neighborhood, guided by Sister Theresa, to pray and talk with the community. We joined hands and prayed with people outside of their weary homes and shared lunch and dinner with all the families who regularly visit the Blue Stand. Among the community were my new-found friends, Brielle, Marissa, and Paris. After spending time with us, Brielle decided she wanted to be baptized in the Catholic Church.

Two words that describe my experience are communion and opening. This service opened my eyes to the needs of my country, and how many people are marginalized in the United States. My heart was opened and flooded with joy and love in serving these people. While doing this service, I felt I was in full communion with the Church and its mission to evangelize, bringing good news to all and being the hands and feet of Christ on Earth.

Physically, we only made a dent of a difference in the community. We needed much more than a week to get to everything we wanted to do, but I know I made someone's day better, or even made them smile, and that's enough for me. I didn't have to fly to some far-away country to build a school or construct a water system (although that's awesome too). I didn't have to work with heavy equipment and bricks to build relationships with the people I served.

To this day, I pray and think about all the people I helped, as well as those who I could not get to in this week. Seeing so much need on this mission trip opened my eyes to pay attention to what's happening right in front of me. As I drive to school every day, I see a homeless lady with her dog asking for food. I keep a little bag of dog food and extra money in my car for those times I can get to her. I went into this week with an open mind, but I also left with an open heart, filled with the love of Christ.