

# HOPE'S ON THE WAY TRIP TO NEW ORLEANS

JUNE 2 – 9, 2007

## The Team

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## Day 1 – June 2, Saturday



We left the Carmelite Center at 7:25 am in three vans.

Our first stop was in Springfield, IL for gas and our first crisis. Phil McGee couldn't find his wallet – it was either lost or he had left it at home. While the rest of us were offering to give Phil some cash to get him through, the wallet was found on one of the seats in the van.

Our second stop was just outside of St. Louis, MO so everyone could *tinkle*. Everyone then voted that we could bypass our scheduled lunch stop at Collinsville, IL and push on. We did stop at Crystal City, MO (about 30 miles south of St. Louis) for lunch at a Bob Evans

Restaurant a little after noon. On the road at 1:05 pm, we stopped again 80 minutes later at Boomtown, MO for gas. That stop took a little longer than expected because of all the ~~junk~~ stuff they had for sale there.

Entered Arkansas at 3:45 pm, entered Mississippi at 4:44 pm and stopped for the day at the Marriott Courtyard in Horn Lake, MS at 5:05 pm. Mileage for the day was 563 – 58 mph including stops.

We all met in the lobby at 6:30 pm for our trip into Memphis. We took the scenic route (which means we got lost) but went past Christian Brothers College (where they make good brandy) and the Kellogg plant (where they make good cereal). Finally we ended up at Beale Street, where we walked up and down the three blocks that make up the blues and jazz part. We decided to have dinner at Alfred's, where there was live music on the ground floor.



We opted to eat on the open roof, where the noise was lower and we could talk. Many had ribs. It was dark after dinner and Beale Street had filled up with many more people. We stopped to watch some black tumbler (much like the Jessie White group) perform in the street by jumping over a bunch of bent over people.

Back to the hotel by 9:30 pm.

The temperature during the day ranged from 90 degrees (most of the time) to 74 degrees during the short rain showers we went through.

**Day 2 – June 3, Sunday**

Breakfast at Courtyard at 7:00 am. Tony gave everyone \$1.00 off coupons for either the made-to-order or buffet breakfast. We were all wearing our red t-shirts which solicited some inquiries from others having breakfast. Everyone checked out at 8:10 am and it was off to Queen of Peace Church for Mass at 8:30. It was a beautiful new church with big cry-room, nine large meeting rooms, and a big hospitality room. During Mass the Priest said something like “There is a group of men here, all wearing red shirts with something about hope on them. I don’t know who they are or where they are going, but lets wish them well.” After Mass we talked to the Pastor, the Deacon and parishioners in the Narthex. At 9:50



am we were on the road for New Orleans.



Our first stop was for gas at I-55 and Route 12 – one of those truck stop/quick mart type of places in the middle on nowhere (Northern Mississippi). When ten men drop in on a place like that, the men’s room gets tied up for quite a while. Since there were no women present, it was suggested that we use both rooms. Someone would stand guard outside the women’s room if a man was “in there”. If a woman came in, the guard would just say, “It’s busy”. A woman did come in while Bud was in the woman’s room and she was told to wait. When Bud came out, the woman chastised Bud verbally for using the woman’s room but was most unhappy with him leaving the “lid up.”

We stopped in Jackson, MS for lunch at McAllister’s Deli – very much like a Panera Bread. The iced tea tasted funny and we were told that all the water in Jackson tastes funny. Each team member paid for his own lunch. Back on the road at 1:40 pm.



One more gas stop and then on to New Orleans. Arrived at Catholic Charities Hope Center at 4:35 pm. Moved in to a white two storied house (Spanish motif) on the campus. The Center was on both sides of a boulevard and contained a large church, an office center, a “wards of the state” building (an orphanage) and two houses, one of which we were staying in. The other house was to be home to eleven Notre Dame students who were going to spend eight weeks helping in New Orleans.

We needed someplace to eat dinner. Joe called a friend in South Bend who was familiar with New Orleans who recommended a Cajun restaurant called the *Sunray* and gave directions. We found the place, but it was a large Mexican restaurant. When we went in, no one else was there, only the staff. We were seated and orders were taken but service was very slow. Most ordered beef or chicken fajitas. Several orders were mixed up. Still there were no more customers. We were getting a little nervous about this place. Towards the end of dinner, the waitress came over and said she was going to turn up the music because there was going to be a party arriving. The Mexican music got very loud and within about 30 minutes, the place was jumping with many Hispanic and African-American people, young and old, having a fine time. One the way out, Buzz asked one of the partiers what’s the occasion and was told “we just like to get together every now and then.”



On the way *home* we stopped at the Winn-Dixie to get some supplies. We got fruit, skim milk, water, Gatorade, condiments, bread. Very funny watching six men trying to shop at a grocery store. Mike registered for a Winn-Dixie card, which began our master savings adventure.

Back to the house at 9:10 pm and everyone in bed by 10:00 pm.

Day’s temperature high was 94 degrees. Luckily our house was air conditioned.

### **Day 3 – June 4, Monday**

The air conditioning was set to the lowest setting the night before and during the night, almost everyone got up to find a blanket or some other covering since the house was so cold. Joe and Mike were in the bedroom on the first floor and the rest were upstairs using the one, two or three person bedrooms.

Breakfast was cereal, orange juice, fruit, bread, jelly and milk. Jim started a team making twenty meat and cheese sandwiches and ten peanut and jelly sandwiches along with some energy bars and cookies for lunch. Every morning someone read the scriptures for the day and one of the Deacons prepared a special prayer for the day.



At 7:00 am we were off to St. Raymond's Catholic Church and School, which was the headquarters for managing and dispatching the work crews for the day. We arrived at 7:15 am and met some people from Jew Jersey in the parking lot. We also met some of the Notre Dame group (both men and women). We went into the school gym that had

been converted into a construction warehouse. There were rows of tools, equipment, supplies and lots of water on pallets. The crew chiefs met with their team and explained what to do and where we were going to work. Our crew chief was Neil and his assistant was John (or Jon). Both were volunteers and committing to work for up to six months.



The Notre Dame group was going to do landscaping. Their crew chief was an attractive young lady, perhaps 25 years old, picking up shovels, tools, buckets by the handfuls, hefting them on her shoulders and lugging lots of stuff for the day out to her truck. We were all amazed at how hard she was working, her general work ethic, and wondered if we were going to be expected to work that hard.

We left St. Raymond's at 8:15 am, following Neil in his truck and headed to our assignment for the week, a house at 9000 Lake Forest Boulevard.

On arrival, Neil issued the assignments that needed to be done:

- Insulate the attic
- Finish dry walling the garage



Tape and mud all the drywall throughout the house  
Sand all mudded and taped walls  
If there is time, paint the whole inside of the house.

We started on the insulating and the drywall. By 9:20 am, everyone was sweating profusely. A lot of water, Propel and Gatorade was being consumed. Sandwiches for the short lunch. Stopped work at 4:00 pm and headed back to Hope Haven House.

Dinner was ground beef pasta, salad, fresh tomatoes, French bread and diet Coke. Lots of fun talking around the dining room table.

After dinner, Joe, Phil and Buzz went to the Outback restaurant that was across the street and a few blocks down for a few beers. We watched part of the Sox/Yankees game in the bar. Sox won 5-1.

All in bed by 10:00 pm.

High temperature for the day was in the 70s thanks to thunder showers all day.

#### **Day 4 – June 5, Tuesday**

On the road early today (7:15 am) so we could stop at Starbucks. Spent the day hanging more drywall in garage, mudding, taping, sanding. This is taking longer than we thought it should. Lots of sweating, drinking water, Gatorade and Propel. Lunch sandwiches – some went to Subway for different sandwiches. Worked hard all day and left at 4:11 pm.

On the way home, we stopped twice. Once to take pictures of a mall and Walgreens that were all boarded up but were scheduled to get the next renovation effort by the city. The second stop was where one of the levies broke in the lower ninth ward. See [New Orleans after Katrina](#) below.

Back to the house by 5:30 pm. Dinner was great. Joe borrowed a grill from the ND group in the other house. There was a problem getting a fire started, but once lit, grilled hamburgers, hot dogs and chicken breasts. Also had salad, sliced tomatoes and onions along with lots of condiments – all purchased and left by Sara. The big hit was Creole Mustard by Zatarans.

High temperature of the day was 90 degrees – no rain but cloudy all day.

#### **Day 5 – June 6, Wednesday**

At breakfast, Frank did the prayer and asked us to remember his daughter in our prayers as she was having a biopsy tomorrow. The group dedicated our day's work to her.

Off at 7:15 am so we could stop at Starbucks again. More mudding, taping, sanding, sweating, drinking, sweating, drinking. In the afternoon we started painting with two coats in the living room.

Reverend was there in the afternoon watching the progress. We think he was pleased. Left Reverend's house at 4:12 pm. This was to be our big night out. Showered and got cleaned up and left at 5:48 pm for the French Quarter. We took only two of the vans with Joe sitting in one of the rear jump seats.

Joe's cell phone and Buzz's camera got wet from sweat in their pockets and didn't work. They had to dry them out and then carried them in their pockets in zip-loc sandwich bags.



We parked across Canal Street and walked to the French Quarter. First stop was an ATM machine. We had reservations at Dickie Brennan's for 7:00 pm but were outside the restaurant at 6:15 pm and very hungry. We decided to go in and see if they could seat us early. They were expecting us because Joe had a friend, who knew Dickie Brennan, make the reservation. We were ushered to a private room set up for the ten of us – it looked like their wine cellar. We had a chief waiter and two assistants. We had a budget of \$500.00 for our “night out” and agreed that anything over that would be “out of our pockets”. We could see big dollar signs as we looked at the menu.

Everything was expensive and ala carte. When the waiter suggested wine, most of us opted for beer. The rib-eye steak was \$38.00. Some had the highly recommended gumbo as an appetizer. Dishes ordered included rib-eye steak, red fish, pork chops, mashed potatoes, au gratin potatoes, creamed spinach, fried onion rings, big asparagus. When the bill came we couldn't believe it – total \$372.00. Tony thought there was an error, but the manager told us he knew that we were in New Orleans to help in the restoration and



so Dickie Brennan, the owner, decided to “comp” some of our food and drink.

Next it was off to Café Le Monde for benjamins and decaf coffee. We met another group of 19 volunteers from a Presbyterian Church in Stillwater,



OK. Their ages were 14 to 64 and they were doing roofing.

Then on to Pat O'Brien's for “Hurricanes” (they don't call it that any more) and beer.

We arrived back at the house at 11:00 pm very tired.

High temperature for the day was 88 degrees.



## Day 6 – June 7, Thursday

Late start – must have been out late last night. Slow start getting going on much of the same stuff we'd been doing since Monday. Painting started to pick up and there was enthusiasm that we might finish with the assigned work and have the whole place painted with two coats by tomorrow.

At around 3:00 pm the Reverend and his daughter brought “authentic” gumbo for the group. We stopped work and ate it on the back patio. Very good – chicken, sausage, shrimp, blue crab in a roux and served over white rice.



Left the Reverend's house at about 4:00 pm and returned to our house and cleaned up. It was great to have a washer and dryer. We were able to wear the same clothes every day because when we got back to the house, we stripped off all our clothes and dumped them in the washing machine. It took several loads but after dinner, a pile of clean (but often used) clothes were ready for the next day.

Dinner was port chops and chicken pasta (left by Sara). Cooked on the ND grill.



After dinner the whole group went to Outback for beer and to watch the Sox game again. Bud had never been to an Outback.



## Day 7 – June 8, Friday

It's the last day to work on the Reverend's house. We are pretty optimistic that we can finish with all the painting by afternoon. There is also talk that we might be able to leave this afternoon and drive overnight back to Chicago.

We arrived at the Reverends house at 7:45 am. Finished up a little sanding and then everyone got started on the painting. Every room was painted with at least two coats of paint and we were finished by about 1:00 pm. Neil came by and complimented us on our work. He said that a lot of groups come to New Orleans and don't know what they are doing or don't do much work. He said we were one of the hardest working groups he had been involved with.



Buzz went to Home Depot to see if he could get the materials to make a new address sign for the Reverend's house. It was a nice thought but Home Depot didn't have enough zeros to make 9000.

We headed back to the house at 1:25 pm,

showered and changed. Decided not to wash the clothes we were wearing but just throw them away. There was a list of ten things that Catholic Charities wanted us to do when leaving. This included cleaning the shower and toilets, cleaning out the refrigerator, taking out the trash, vacuuming (the vacuum didn't work), etc. We left the house clean at 3:03 pm and gassed up at the corner Chevron station. We had a little trouble getting to I-10 and had to go through an industrial area and were stopped by a long freight train.



It was agreed that there would be switch breaks every two or three hours. Each van would have a driver, a navigator and the other(s) would sleep. This worked well but not many people were able to sleep.

Each van was equipped with a two way radio. Towards the end of the trip these were not always operating properly – needed battery change or local interference. We worked out a light blinking system if a van could hear the message, but couldn't respond.

## Day 8 – June 9, Saturday

About 5:30 am on Saturday everyone had been up for almost 24 hours which included working for several hours on the house. We were only about two hours out of Chicago but everyone was tired and it was not clear anyone could stay awake and drive for the last 100 miles. Everyone was **TIREDD!!!!**

We made it. Two vans pulled into the Carmelite Center at 7:30 am. One van went directly to Orland Park.

## Our House in New Orleans



The house we stayed in each night was a two story Spanish style house on the Catholic Charities Hope Haven Campus. The campus was on both sides of a boulevard and had mostly large buildings – a church, administration building, and orphanage. There were two “houses” – we had one and the ND students had the other.

The house had a living room with three large



couches and an old TV (no cable), a kitchen, dining room, six bedrooms (having one, two or three beds) and two bathrooms. The bathrooms were crowded in the morning and when we returned in the evening. Taking a shower was a challenge. First, there were ten dirty, smelly men all wanting to get cleaned up but there were only two showers. And then there was the issue of hot water – there generally wasn't any. If there was hot water, it was generally controlled by the faucets in the sinks in the bathroom. The faucets in the upstairs sinks didn't do anything but turn on and off the flow of cold water in the shower. If someone decided to shave, and turned on the faucet at one of the sinks, it could really mess up the guy taking the shower.



There were three piles in the house – old clothes, old shoes and Mardi Gras beads. The old clothes pile was pretty raunchy. There were things living in that pile.

Our house refrigerator was stocked daily by a lady named Sara, who left several main dishes she had prepared as well as providing the other provisions such as cereal, milk, orange juice, fruit, etc. We never got to meet and thank Sara; she was kinda like the Mystery Lady. If we were short something or if Tony called requesting something for the group, it would be there when we got back to the house.



It was like living in a college dorm. The rooms were clean and the beds were utilitarian. The only thing in the kitchen that allowed heating was the microwave. Luckily there was a coffee pot.



Every morning, after breakfast, one of the Deacons said a prayer and one of the non-Deacons read from scripture for the day. This generally got us off one a good start.



## The Reverend's House

The house we worked on was located at 9000 Lake Forest Boulevard. It was situated on a corner lot and the house was approximately 2400 square feet, measured from the outside. Inside measurements of all rooms indicated the livable space, including the new garage space was approximately 2015 sq. ft. It was owned by Reverend Alexander Byrd, a Baptist minister. The house was not insured. Several months before Katrina, the



Reverend's insurance company raised his premium by \$1000. The Reverend contested the rate increase. After several months of letters going back and forth, the Reverend got a letter saying his insurance had been canceled, even though he had been paying at the old monthly rate. Two months later, Katrina hit, and the house had about six feet of water in it for several weeks. The insurance company told the Reverend that the house was uninsured.

The house had been "mucked". That meant that after the water went down, and probably many months after that, someone went in and removed all the furniture, appliances, carpets, clothing in closets, cabinets, dry wall,

insulation, window frames - everything down to the studs. The studs were then sprayed with bleach and other chemicals to sanitize the frame. When this is done, there is an official inspection and the front of the house is spray painted with something like "TOX 9/11/06" indicating that the house could now be "rebuilt".



We could not get a direct answer to why the Reverend qualified for the volunteer work provided by Catholic Charities. Indirectly we heard that all the volunteer agencies were trying to encourage religious people (ministers, pastors, other church leaders) to come back, get established and then try to encourage their congregations to come back. The Reverend told us that he knew where only half of his congregation was – the rest he had no idea where they were.

The Reverend's house had four bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, two bathrooms, and the garage was being converted into a theater room. There was also a small covered patio in the back off the living room. A walled courtyard was in the front of the house. The Reverend insisted the theater room (garage) would not be "one of those new media center rooms". He was going to paint one end of the garage with some kind of reflective paint so he could project films and slides onto it. His plan may have been to use this space as his new church. The bedroom just off the garage was to become the Reverend's office.

When we finished with our work in the Reverend's house, all that was left to do was the floors ("No more carpets", per the Reverend), the windows, trim, and the plumbing fixtures. "I sure wish I had my commode installed," the Reverend kept saying.

Or last picture in the Reverend's front yard.



**A JOB WELL DONE!!!**

## Around the Reverend's House

A tour around the Reverend's block provided a glimpse of what was going on in all the hard hit areas. It appeared to be a statement of who had insurance, who didn't have insurance, who had charitable help (like the Reverend) and those who left and "ain't coming back".



The house right behind the Reverend's house had been mucked out but the roof had caved inward. The Reverend said the people who owned that house had gotten a divorce just before Katrina; he didn't think they had any insurance and was sure they weren't coming back. He said the House was for sale for \$36,000 but there was no one foolish enough to pay that kind of money for that wreck. He was afraid the house was just going to sit there and drag down property values. He estimated that before Katrina, most houses in his neighborhood were valued at about \$150,000.

Down the street behind the Reverend's house you see a variety of houses either completed, some completed with a stockade fence around them, some being worked on by owners living in trailers, and others just left to rot.



The city had required that the people living in trailers had to install PVC piping to connect their sewage to the sewer system. So the trailers have all this white plumbing coming out of them.

The lady who owned the house across the street from the Reverend's house was doing all her own repair with the help of friends. She appeared to be Hispanic and had two small children (maybe 6 and 4) who had to stay in their car across the street with all the doors opened and supplied with juice, cereal and games while the mother worked on the house. The mother appeared to be about five month pregnant. Yet she was climbing a ladder and helping put on a new roof!





Generally all the sidewalks looked like this.



## The Reverend

Reverend Alexander Byrd is the son of Professor Longhair (Henry Reoland Byrd), one of the most important musical figures in New Orleans' rich musical legacy as a pianist, composer and singer. See appendix.



The Reverend left New Orleans after Katrina with his wife and moved to Tennessee. He returned to New Orleans periodically to try to get help in restoring his house, and finally got it through Catholic Charities. He explained that he was told that Catholic Charities would help with the following:

- Muck out
- Insulation
- Drywall
- Taping, mudding, sanding
- Painting
- Trim
- Floors

Catholic Charities would not do all of this work for the Reverend. He was expected to get friends and family (James) or paid contractors to do a certain percentage of the work. The Reverend had arranged to have new doors and windows installed, the grill work painted, flooring and trim to be completed by his selected friends and contractors.

He has a daughter living in New Orleans just a few blocks from the Reverend's house. One day the daughter came by the house to see how things were going and when asked who she was, replied, "This is my Daddy's house."

The daughter had a boyfriend (SO) named James who was at the house most of the time. James was helping the Reverend with all kinds of odd jobs. He was cleaning the rust off the "ornamental" (protective) wrought iron work on all the windows and doors and then repainting them black. He also cut the weeds in the yard.



On Wednesday the Reverend was at his house when we arrived. He met us in the front yard and asked if we would all join hands so he could pray for us and thank us for the work we were doing. He did a great Baptist type prayer that made us all feel good. Halleluiah!!!! And praise the Lord.

## New Orleans after Katrina

New Orleans is still in pretty bad shape. Our estimates of the percentage of houses and businesses in badly hit areas that have returned to normal ranged from 20 to 35 percent. Every day, as we drove to the Reverend's house, we had to go through the city and past the Super Dome and over the Huey P. Long Bridge.



The first few times we took this drive, it looked like the city was back to normal. But closer observation indicated that there were several tall building with windows still out, the bus yard was full of city busses and traffic during "rush hour" was very light.

In the lower ninth ward, all police and fire stations were brand new. We assumed they got some of the initial state and federal money to get this area back on it feet. We noticed all the street lights were brand new also. Not many houses or business renovated in this area, however.

Commercial areas are identified by the wards to be restored based on the return of people and the houses that are restored and occupied.

The levies were not built to hold back the waters of Lake Ponchartrain or the Mississippi river. The levies broke at causeways between the two that acted like canals. When we visited the levee break in the lower Ninth Ward on Wednesday, we saw where the levee had given way and water rushed into the neighborhood



of



houses. A barge also was carried along and ended up where houses had been. The water washed away many houses leaving only foundations. There is a law suit going

on as to whether the levee broke and the barge was carried into the neighborhood by rushing water or whether the barge broke loose from its mooring and crashed into the levee causing the breach.

A new levee has been built, but they say it won't survive another category five hurricane.



There was a blue house near the levee break that said it all.

There were commercial areas that were completely boarded up.



Another thing that we saw that indicated the problem was the trash, blocks and blocks of it.



