

## My trip to New Orleans

Our house is at 2924 St Roch. The owner, Ms. Pratt, is a 75-year-old lady who lives in a FEMA trailer behind the house with her brother who is also in his 70s. This project is somewhat complicated since they did receive some insurance money and have had contractors do the electrical, HVAC, and some construction. The outside is in pretty good shape. Our task is to first put tar paper between the exposed studs to cover all the open spaces in the exterior walls, then put R13 insulation, and then sheetrock the walls and ceiling. This house is unique in that it is a double shotgun (2 houses with a common wall), but the center wall was removed in parts of the house to make it a large house. We see Ms. Pratt, her brother, and her daughter every day. Ms. Pratt and her daughter call me Mr. Roger.

On Monday morning after my introductory talk about safety, good workmanship, and enjoying the task, we begin work. Volunteers break into small groups for the tarpapering. One volunteer does nothing but load the staple guns all day, a necessary job since we are using about ten guns all the time. We finish papering and begin insulating in the afternoon. I am busy directing the insulating. Unfortunately, this 80-year-old house has very little framing on 16" centers so much cutting and trimming is required. By the end of the day we have papered the whole house and insulated more than half of it. I tell the RT office we will be ready for the sheetrock Tuesday morning; they are surprised by the rapid progress of our "semi-skilled" group.

After lunch four RT volunteers with much construction experience join us. They install sheetrock and give some direction to the other volunteers, and by the end of the day we have made quite a bit of progress. After work we get the Ozzie (from Malta) tour of the 9<sup>th</sup> ward. Little has changed of the devastation since my previous trip in December.

Wednesday morning is the trip to St. Peter Clavere Catholic Church, and work doesn't begin until late in the morning. Mark, another of the St. Louis RT volunteers, joins us. He has his own construction business; he was scheduled to be a house captain on a paint job, but has joined us instead. He is very helpful and is a wonderful teacher to the other volunteers, helping and directing them in a very supportive manner. Of our group of pros from yesterday, we only have Tom for the entire day and Scott for part of the afternoon. Probably setting an all time record, we have four injuries in 1½ hours. All the injuries were minor, and, surprisingly, all but one was by the "pros". (I had warned the volunteers earlier to be much more careful than the pros were being.) That evening at the dinner the Archbishop of New Orleans told the history of how the Church had performed during Katrina, and all the future work that is required. His talk reinforced Xx.

Thursday is the last day for most of the volunteers. We are now quite efficient. We finished one side of the house. Even with our stoppages, church, and the 9<sup>th</sup> ward tour, we made a major accomplishment in these four days.

Shortly before dinner Tom from RT gave Lynn, Mark, and me his special tour of the lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. We saw Fats Domino's house and his sound studio next door. It looks repaired. We also saw the Habitat for Humanity musician's village, 50 similar houses built specifically for

musicians to return to New Orleans. Each house is painted a different bright color. Mark said it looked like a basket of Easter eggs.

That evening was our final dinner as a group. All of us have signed a RT/Malta tee shirt, and I presented it to Ms. Pratt at the banquet; she was very appreciative. Finally, the leader of the New Orleans Catholic Charities spoke. He gave a heart rendering description of events here during and after Katrina leaving tears in many of our eyes.

On Friday some of the volunteers, the pros, and I did more sheet rocking. By the end of the day (and week) we had used 150 sheets of 4' by 8' sheet rock to finish 2/3 of the house.

Lynn and I got a car on the weekend and drove around other parts of the city. After only seeing low-income neighborhoods, I finally saw middle class and upper class houses. These neighborhoods in many ways looked like Treme and St. Roch: some houses completely gone, others with markings of NE (no entry), 0 bodies, and no indication of occupancy since Katrina, streets with big chuckholes, and trash along the curb, and FEMA trailers.

A very satisfying and enjoyable week.