

A helping hand for New Orleans

Parts Plus Car Care Center owner returns to repair Katrina-ravaged homes

Nearly five years after Hurricane Katrina ravaged parts of the Gulf Coast, Parts Plus Car Care Center owner Mark Wigley and his team from Calvary Community Church in Columbia, Md., returned to the New Orleans area in May to help families still without a suitable place to call home.

Since Katrina, this was the 10th visit for the Calvary team, who make the 2,200-mile round-trip drive to the Gulf Coast about twice a year to help people they've never met and likely won't see again. They keep coming back, even though the media has long since moved on, now focused on the BP oil spill, the latest tragedy to hit the Gulf Coast.

"We're trying to make a difference in people's lives," explains Wigley, owner of New Life Automotive, a five-bay Car Care Center located in a southwest suburb of Baltimore. "Five years after the worst natural disaster this country has seen, there are those still coming in the spirit of brotherhood to help. We step out of our comfort zone and into someone else's disaster zone to continue the legacy of making America the greatest country in the world."

Partnering once again with the Touch Global Crisis Response organization, Wigley's group split into four teams.



Broken homes: damaged, boarded-up houses are a stark reminder of hurricane Katrina.

They helped families regain some semblance of normalcy and peace in their homes, including Alberta L., who was living in makeshift conditions on the property her house once stood complete in Mandeville, La. Her son, Gary, was forced to live in a 12' x 12' shed in the backyard. One team hung sheetrock and applied spackle, and installed siding and soffits in Alberta's house. The house was out of square, which made the project more challenging, but the Calvary team members helped get the job done. Another group helped install soffits, framing and siding for Valerie T.'s New Orleans house, in addition to cutting 50 rafter tails to line them up to accept the new fascia boards.

Other team members helped install kitchen cabinets, trim, fencing, flooring and interior doors for Sonya L.'s home in the Upper Ninth Ward, working alongside her son, Glen, who inspired the team when he talked about how he used a boat to bring members of his family to safety after the city flooded.

The fourth group assisted with tearing out old concrete and jacking and leveling Pat J.'s home, and reframed and resupported the floor.

"We understand that Pat has been an advocate for her community, helping others get back in their home," Wigley says. "It was our privilege and joy to be one of the first teams to help her start getting her house renovation underway." In addition to home-repair projects, Mark and his group spent afternoons with inner-city youths playing games and attended a block party cookout, where they were able to talk with local residents and listen to what they had been through.

"They love to tell their stories of survival, and we enjoy hearing them," he says. Some folks shared with me stories about people they knew within

a two-block radius from where we were standing who had died in the storm. I had a good talk with a man named Mr. Red, who told us how he stayed in his house for days till the floodwater receded. We talked for almost an hour, and the man warmed up to us after finding out why we were there. He was very grateful for our commitment to continue coming down almost five years after the storm. It was refreshing to see the barriers come down as we talked candidly about a number of things."

Still, Wigley realizes that not everyone is glad to see them, and that tensions still run high in the area. He was on a ladder when a man warned him that carpenters who were working across the street were just held up at gunpoint. This was not far from the neighborhood where occupants of two cars came down the street shooting at each other as the Calvary team was working in October 2009.

Toward the end of his week in New Orleans, however, Wigley experienced one of those moments that reminded him of just how much their work positively impacts the community. He received a call from the church office back home informing him that someone in New Orleans who noticed their church trailer around town had taken the time to call to say thank you.

"Our success isn't measured strictly by how much work we got done," he explains. "These homeowners could have done it all by themselves with help from friends. But what really made this trip successful was the relational connection we made with them."

"We're blessed as a team to grow closer together and rely on one another more than we ever expected—we have the privilege of doing what we can to help others." ■



House call: Mark's team goes to work.