

**Submission for the Rowan University Award for Creative Nonfiction**

Mike Breuning  
120 North Union St.  
Lambertville, N.J. 08530  
(609) 468 – 2338  
Class of 2011  
February 29, 2008

**Realization Through Service**

## Realization Through Service

Lying on my stiff, small, cot, drowning in sweat and unable to sleep amidst the slumbering sounds of my 200 roommates, I asked myself for maybe the one-hundredth time why I was putting myself through this. It wasn't just the overwhelming smell of patchouli, my grime-infested body, or the unrelenting heat of the Mississippi Gulf coast, what really bothered me was the thought that all across the country almost everyone I knew was sleeping comfortably in the privacy of their dorm rooms in college.

I had been volunteering on the Gulf Coast doing hurricane relief for seven months and still did not feel the gratification that is advertised in volunteering; in fact, the only things I was feeling were exhausted, overheated, and a little homesick.

Since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita roared through the region, the Gulf coast has sometimes been referred to as a "Mecca" for volunteers. Being there for over a half a year gave me the status of being a "long-term" volunteer. I was an old hand and hardly noticed my surroundings anymore. "Short term" volunteers constantly filtered in and out of our camp in Biloxi. I was always surprised by the newcomers' shock as they took in the vast devastation that still remained, over a year after the hurricanes. I no longer noticed the vacant lots that were once houses or stores, the gutted and damaged homes far beyond repair, or the lifeless, stick-like trees as the city had grown to feel like my home.

Driving a late 80's Ford Ranger packed full of tools, lumber, and a group of gung-ho volunteers, I would arrive at the allotted worksite each day. Since it was my job to supervise the "newbies," who varied from college students my own age, to retired lawyers, doctors, and even a dean from Yale, I concentrated only on conveying my limited construction knowledge to make use of this unskilled, but highly motivated, labor in the most efficient way. I had no time to pause and think about how this shattered

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wreck of a worksite was actually at one time a family's home: a home that was robbed of its belongings and happy memories by Katrina's angry storm surge.

Pre-Katrina, downtown Biloxi had been a close-knit shrimping community composed almost entirely of Vietnamese immigrants and African Americans. This presumption was impossible to discern now, as the current demography more closely resembled a Grateful Dead reunion tour with the majority of inhabitants being dreadlocked, northern volunteers. It seemed to be impossible for a "yankee," such as myself, to truly fathom this no longer evident culture that so vastly differs from anything I had experienced growing up in New Jersey.

Occasionally, I would find traces of this foreign southern society I had been hearing so much about. One afternoon while gutting a house of its rotted, mold-infested, interior, I came across the family's collection of plastic Mardi Gras beads. They were stored in the same large Tupperware container in which my family stores our beloved Christmas decorations. Regardless that the spray paint on the front door reminded me that no bodies were found in the initial search of *this* particular house, the discovery was still a painful, intimate reminder of the memories lost. I felt a connection with this unknown family and for the first time, was able to empathize with their loss. But just as quickly as this discovery had impacted me, it was soon forgotten realizing I had left a group of high school kids unsupervised with a collection of dangerous power tools.

Most of the population of Biloxi now lived in FEMA trailer parks outside of the City in a township called D'Iberville. Because of this, the only people I saw on a daily basis were the aforementioned volunteers, paid construction worker, tourists (yes, people still considered this a vacation destination due to the fact that many of the casinos were

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repaired less than a year after the storm), and the occasional drunk looking to do some tool shopping from the back of our trucks. I worked everyday alongside other volunteers rarely having contact with the Biloxi locals. Occasionally, one would drift onto the worksite, not to show appreciation for our help, but to try to pressure us into helping him pay for his early morning 6-pack while towering over us with a loaded nail gun. It was difficult to maintain a positive image about a population that threatens your life while you work to rebuild their homes.

It was not until my last month volunteering in the Gulf that I worked on a house alongside its actual homeowner. In addition to our regular 80-hour workweek, every weekend a group of us volunteers would work on a home that was deemed by the Coordination Center as too damaged to be repaired. I spent my last four weekends in Biloxi trying to salvage a sad wreck of wood and cement that John Gracon and his wife had once called home.

Mr. Gracon was a large and burley man, maybe in his mid-sixties, who no matter what the temperature, always wore a faded grey sweatshirt that appeared much darker than it was due to the fact it was regularly soaked with sweat. Brimming with energy and gratitude, he would join us after his 10-hour shift at a steel mill ready to rip up rotted and moldy floorboards. Meeting him, one would never guess that his home of 40 years had been destroyed, most of his possessions had been washed away, and he had spent the last 18 months living in a trailer a fraction of the size of his historic antebellum home. His wife possessed the same enthusiasm as he. She never failed to welcome us (complete strangers at first) with a kiss on the cheek while shouting that we were her “little angels” and the “answer to her prayers.”

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On my last weekend in the Gulf Coast, the Gracons insisted that the group, who had been working on their house, join them for a “real Mississippi” lunch. John had been bragging about his world-class gumbo, and he wanted us to taste it. Though they lost practically everything, they still had their generous spirit and felt the need to give back.

We arrived at the FEMA trailer park and stood aghast. The endless sprawl of similarity was like something out of a sci-fi movie. Small white trailers were parked barely more than an arms-length away from one other as far as the eye could see. There was barely any sign of human habitation. Even those of us who had thought we’d seen it all were speechless. It was nearly impossible to find the Gracon’s temporary home; it seemed to be a futile task.

Just as we were about to turn around and succumb to yet another Salvation Army lunch, we caught a whiff of fried catfish. We followed our noses until we stumbled upon the Gracon’s trailer, where a Southern dinner of catfish, trout, bass, gumbo, sweet tea and the mandatory kisses from Mrs. Gracon awaited us. They were as excited as the gung-ho, short-term volunteers to show us their appreciation for the work we had been doing on their devastated home. I think it was a memorable day for all of us; it certainly was for me.

Now as I lie on my not-much-bigger bed here at Rowan and think back to my time in the Gulf, my thoughts return to the Gracon family. The love and appreciation they showed was beyond anything I ever expected. I know I will remember them for the rest of my life. I realize now that even though it is not always immediately evident, one person (or in this case, a couple) can truly make a difference in peoples’ lives. They

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taught me that the bond of humanity is strong enough to unite even the most different of people as long as you maintain a positive and sympathetic attitude.