

A Volunteer's Journal

*A Week of Repairing Homes After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita
in Houma, Louisiana, July 2006*



Ji-Hye Ham

I never thought I would go down to New Orleans again, especially so soon. I was only there just last March during Spring Break to help gut houses. Yet, another opportunity arose to go there again in July to help rebuild homes instead, this time with another group of volunteers from MIT led by Dr. Reinhard Goethert. I could feel the excitement growing as my departure date drew closer. To go down to a place so devastated is truly such a humbling experience. I was glad to have played a small, yet fulfilling role in relieving Louisiana of its burdens. The following pages document my week (the second of the two-week program), providing a glimpse into my experience as a volunteer.

Ji-Hye Ham

MIT Class of 2008
Architecture



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Through partnerships with various organizations and people, we all worked together in achieving the common goal of actively responding to the devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The Volunteer Weeks was led by Dr. Reinhard Goethert director of MIT-SIGUS (Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement). Participants varied from MIT faculty members to students from various departments, mainly from the departments of Architecture and Urban Studies and Planning. Oxfam, a non-governmental organization, made the initial introduction of MIT to TRAC (Terrebonne and Lafourche Recovery Coalition) which guided our reconstruction work in Houma. Gordon Case from TRAC was our main construction supervisor. PDA (Presbyterian Disaster Assistance) was our camp host and Andrea Mitchell was our camp manager. Zachary Lamb from MIT was our link who had already been working in Houma since the beginning of the summer.

Week One Volunteers: July 9-15

Jonathan Cherry
Carolyn Choy
Laura Feiveson
Dr. Reinhard Goethert
Caroline Jones
Zachary Lamb
Jae Rhim Lee
Charles Mathis
Jodie Misiak
Luke Schray
James Stevens

Week Two Volunteers: July 16-22

Eylem Basaldi
Diane Choo
Carolyn Choy
Anne Dodge
Dr. Reinhard Goethert
Ji-Hye Ham
Zachary Lamb
William Lopes
Charles Mathis
Alison Novak
Anthony Sabelli (Brown University)
Jeremy Shaw
Jimmy Shen
James Stevens
Jennifer Tran

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web.mit.edu/sigus



www.oxfamamerica.org



www.trac4la.com



www.pcusa.org/pda

Sunday the 16th

Before going to Houma, to the Good Earth Village, we took a detour and drove through the devastated Ward Nine in New Orleans. It's completely humbling to see houses utterly destroyed with automobiles in the most unnatural positions. This bleak area truly emanates an eerie feeling of abandonment and desolation, casting periods of silence during our slow drive through. A sharp reminder that we are in an area, we are amongst people who have witnessed and experienced a great tragedy.



With the minivan wheels crunching along the gravel, we peered out of the windows to witness rows of little blue plastic houses complete with white plastic roofs and sides, assuming that those were our homes for the next week. It was exactly as how the information packet portrayed it to be. The weather there wasn't as hot as we expected or feared it would be, it was actually rather nice and not that unbearable yet. We guessed it was partly due to the thunderstorm that had just passed.



The camp set-up is pretty clear: accordion style plastic pods taking up a considerable amount of the camp site with slightly elevated wooden planks as pathways between the pods and the rest of the facilities. I heard those planks come in rather handy when it rains since we wouldn't have to step in the muddy grass.





Bright yellow 'port-a-potties' dot along the driveway. Separated by genders, I've discovered that these 'port-a-potties' are not that bad. It's actually one of the most pleasant of all the 'port-a-potties' I've been in. We'll see how I feel about that later in the week. The showers (which I haven't experienced yet) are in a trailer of some sort, also separated by gender with three shower stalls each. Outside of the shower trailer, four sinks with two large mirrors provide washing facilities.



There's a large white tent for communal gathering, meals and meetings I suppose. A few tents and a wooden shed-type structure functions as a kitchen, food and tool storage areas. Overall, this place seems to be run pretty well and pretty smoothly. The camp manager, Andrea Mitchell, seems pretty cheerful and helpful and very effective and efficient at her job.



Monday the 17th

My eyes first opened at 5:42 am, but realizing the time, I quickly fell back asleep and woke up at 6:30 am.

Despite the early rise, just as everyone said yesterday night, we actually didn't leave until 9 am. There were two houses that needed reconstruction: Don's house which was worked on by the MIT crew the week before us and Jacob's house which was a complete mess and needed the most help. Since Don's house was nearly finished, only five people were needed, so I volunteered. Soon after, I realized that

since I am supposed to be documenting this trip that I should have opted to go to Jacob's house instead which will have the most people. So I talked to Carolyn (who was also here the week before) and she switched me with William.

However, when we were loading up in the vans, because of the large number of people in Jacob's work site, I got moved back to Don's house. So it was me and my little lunch bag shuffling from one van to the other, from one food cooler to the other. Hence our work crew consisted of Eylem (my Village roommate and also our designated driver), Charlie, Anthony, Jenn, William, and me.



When we arrived at Don's house it looked pretty much finished. It just needed trim at the corners of the walls to cover the wall paneling flaws, grouting (applying the mortar between and under the tiles) in the bathroom, some ceiling tiles put in, wall paneling in the bathroom, and some baseboard installments. I was a bit timid and almost overwhelmed at first with all the big power tools and drills and wires and endless coils of wires. There was also some terminology that I had to catch on like grouting for instance, and coping (which I think it means rounding off the profiles of where trim meets trim) and others.

The nail guns, the loud compressor, and the chop saw were all intimidating at first, but seeing that people like Charlie and Anthony (who were here before) knew how to use them was reassuring and it was pretty easy to catch on and get a hold of how to use them. The nail guns were pretty fun, except when they spout air in your face sometimes after you pull the trigger. The compressor makes a lot of noise every now and then, but I was told that that was normal since it needs to fill up with air again.



All in all I think it was a really good experience, my first shot at construction or home improvement rather. However, the trim could have gone a lot faster and more efficiently if it weren't for having only one pencil to mark things and there were a lot of funny corners that met quite unattractively. So figuring that out took much time and since we ran out of the L's, quarter rounds and crowns, we had to stop that work altogether.

Anthony and Charlie worked on trim, Jenn and William did some baseboard work, and Eylem nailed in the wood panels on the walls. Later Jenn, William, and Eylem grouted the bathroom tiles and sponge them off. I secretly wanted to play with the gooey stuff, but I was asked to take measurements on how much more of the L's, quarter rounds, and crowns we needed for tomorrow.



Well, after our work day at Don's house was over, we drove by Jacob's house to see the other team and their work. That house was truly a mess. It looks like that house had been gutted recently (or perhaps not so recently), but the fact that Jacob and his girlfriend Renel was

currently living in it did not facilitate the team's work since furniture and belongings were everywhere and had to be shuffled around. I took some pictures and toured the house with my group and then we were off, back to the Good Earth Village.



I quickly headed for the showers. It was nice to take a cold shower after sweating all day, even though it felt like our group had it much easier than the other crew. We then waited around for dinner to get ready. Although dinner was projected to be done by 7 pm, we really didn't get to start eating until 8 pm, but it was a good dinner: pork and applesauce, corn, mashed potatoes, bread and butter, and lemonade to drink - a nice hot meal after a full day of work.

Tuesday the 18th

It was a pretty slow morning, particularly since our work crew had to wait until Gordon (the construction supervisor from TRAC) bought all the materials we needed. So after breakfast and making our bag lunches, our team ended up helping around the Village for a few hours. Eylem bleached the recycled plates for the experimental Styrofoam insulation project, Anthony did some weed whacking, Charlie worked on the shed roof, William got to do some ant-killing, and I got to tear apart a wooden frame that was stapled together. The tricky part was that I was instructed to try to keep all the wooden pieces intact since they were going to be used for reinforcing the flimsy plastic hut doors that keeps peeling off due to the weak Velcro. I got drenched in sweat before we even left for the worksite!



But we finally went to Don's house and got to work. Anthony worked on the front door locks and door jams with the help of Charlie. Charlie also instructed Jenn, Eylem, and William on how to install the bathroom ceiling tiles, and I went to work on the trim. However, when I got to the crown moldings where the ceiling meets the wall, I thought it looked pretty self-explanatory, but apparently I've been cutting them all at the wrong angles since the pieces didn't fit. So Charlie showed me how to cut

them properly and cope them for the corners which was a lot harder than it looks or sounds. You essentially had to take the coping saw or a knife and cut following the edge of the profile, angling back so that it fits right onto a crown-molding piece that's flush against the wall. I spent a good hour or two with William trying to finish the crown molding in the bedroom area! That took way too long. But it got done and it doesn't look perfect, but we tried!





We all had planned to go to a presentation on estuaries, but there was some miscommunication and we didn't know when it was being held until it was too late. We could have made it to the talk, but none of us wanted to attend it while we were all dirty and sweaty from working all day. So instead, we went back to the Village, cleaned up, and planned to all meet up at 7 pm to go out to dinner since dinner was at the estuary presentation. We actually didn't leave the camp until 8 pm because we were indecisive about where to go for dinner, so we ended up just piling into the two vans and driving somewhere. We ended up circling the same area three times before finally settling in a restaurant called 1921 Seafood. All famished at that point, we quickly ordered our meals and had a feast. I had a great meal of gumbo, catfish, fries, buttered toast, and a coke.

After paying the bill, we left for the camp, but our van, driven by Jimmy took a little side trip to Scarlet's Scoop for some ice cream. It was a very cute candy and ice cream shop and Jimmy, Jenn, William, Anthony, Eylem, and I all had some ice cream - a very satisfying way to end a good meal.



Wednesday the 19th

Supposedly someone always ring the bell for people to wake up and eat breakfast. But I don't think I ever hear it (or my alarm clock) since I always end up waking up a bit later than most people. Hence, I usually miss the hot breakfast food, but I'm not a big breakfast person anyways so I never mind.

Today was a bit hotter than the other days, we could feel the humidity and heat even in the early hours. I am actually quite surprised though that the weather here isn't as extreme as we all thought it would be and the mosquitoes here aren't that savage either. I only got one or two bites, but others have been attacked pretty thoroughly. We thought we would finish Don's house today, but unfortunately we didn't. However, I don't think our entire crew will go back to Don's house tomorrow. Only half of us will stay probably and the other half will go and help out at Jacob's house. At Don's house, we worked on various things.

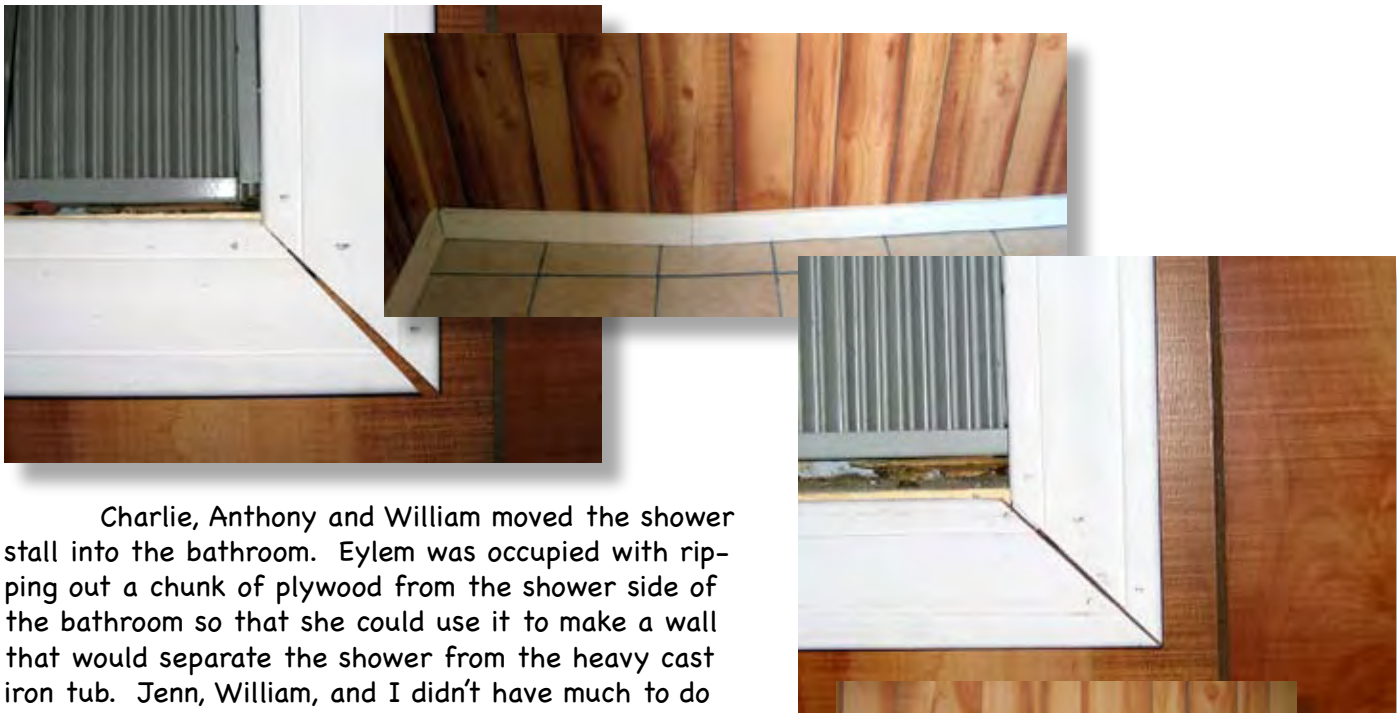
William and I did some finishing touch-ups on the painting job on the side of the house. I had to go around and touch-up all the accidental white paint spots with the gray-blue paint (which is the color of the house). William repainted the canopy over the bedroom window with some white sealer.



After the painting jobs, we got to work on putting interior frames on the windows. At first we were going to construct this whole elaborate thing to make sills for the windows, but thank goodness Gordon said we didn't have to which made the task a hundred times easier and faster. I was looking for work to do since only so many can work at a job at one time, so I went to where Jenn was and asked her if she needed help. She really didn't need help, but we teamed up anyways to do the framing in the bedroom window.

Yet, we all soon realized that everything in Don's house was crooked - everything! Nothing was coplanar that should be, no 90 degree (or close to 90 degree) angles, no straight planes - everything was skewed and off! So the window trim was a lot more work than we anticipated. A lot of shims, thin pieces of scrap wood, had to be used to cover the flaws or try to compensate for the errors - but it still didn't make things anywhere near "perfect." However we were told by Charlie that Don and his wife don't want a perfect house because they don't live perfectly since that's just not who they are. Well that sure is reassuring to know!

So the window frame that Jenn and I worked was a bit difficult to figure out since the window sides weren't flush with the wall and we had to admit, it ended up fairly ugly. Charlie then came by and gave us a better idea to make the framing look nicer. He cut us long skinny wood strips to compensate for the level changes. Before, Jenn and I just shoved and nailed wooden shims and wedges which left pretty awful gaps, so now it looks a lot better. Also there was an awful gap in the right bottom corner where the frames met, so we redid it.



Charlie, Anthony and William moved the shower stall into the bathroom. Eylem was occupied with ripping out a chunk of plywood from the shower side of the bathroom so that she could use it to make a wall that would separate the shower from the heavy cast iron tub. Jenn, William, and I didn't have much to do after finishing the window framing, so we tried to be helpful and wandered around looking for work.

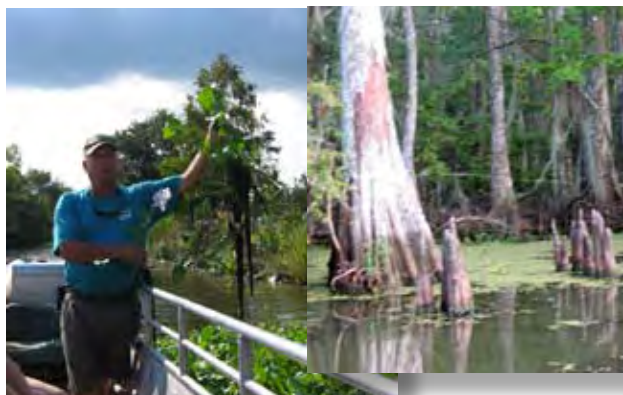


After lunch, Eylem and Charlie went to Home Depot to get two by fours to make studs for the wall. It was really funny because they came back with ridiculously bright pink two by fours. They said that they were color-coded by length but why bright fluorescent pink on all sides, all the way down, is still a mystery.



Anthony worked on making “perfect” door jams for the bathroom and bedroom doorways. And perfect they needed to be or else the door won’t fit. So that took him a very long time, lots of trial and error with lots of nailing and prying of shims, leveling, and tape measuring. The floors, ceilings, and walls were all off and crooked making tasks much more complicated.

We actually left at 3:30 pm so that we could get back to camp at 4 pm and get ready to go to a swamp tour by 5 pm. Most of us went and we were all glad we did - it was so much fun! The tour was called Annie Miller's Son's Swamp Tour and we got to ride in a boat and learn a lot about the local vegetation and wildlife. We saw so many alligators too! I was amazed that our tour guide knew each alligator by name and that the alligators actually responded to his calling to get a bite of raw chicken that he dangles off of a pole. We learned that alligators were territorial so our tour guide knew where each alligator dwelled in certain sections of the swamp. It was such a pleasant tour since we passed the heat of the day so the weather was cool and surprisingly there was a lack of bugs. Afterwards we ate at their restaurant and got back to the Village around 10 pm.



Thursday the 20th

I did my chore of the week this morning - 'lunch prep and clean up.' Everyone was highly encouraged to sign up for a chore on the "chore board" in the white communal tent that would assist in the "village beautification." There were some chores that nearly everyone avoided such as cleaning the 'port-a-potties.' I think most of us would rather wait for the 'port-a-potty' cleaning truck to come along.

So the three people from Don's house that got shifted to Jacob's house were William, Jenn, and me. We prepared for some harsher conditions since we heard from the other team members that there's no air conditioning like we had in Don's house nor were there any bathrooms. When we got there, we had to move a lot of stuff off of the porch and rearrange the furniture inside to create a decent amount of work space. It really makes it a lot more difficult if the homeowners are actually living in the house that you are working on.

CHORES (PLEASE RE-SPECIFY)	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Breakfast prep		Brittini	Donna Brittini	Donna Brittini	Primi	Brittini
breakfast clean-up		Jessica	Ronate	Limce	Sandra	Sandra
lunch prep/clean-up	Janna Sandi	Joan	Jeremy	Anne	Jill-Hye	
dinner cook		Barb Bright	Alison Anna	Anthony		Anthony Jerry
dinner clean-up	Amanda Rosemary	Lucy	Carolyn	Jeremy Neil	Anthony Mary	Budget
table/counter wipe-down AM		Bonnie	Limce	Limce	Doree L	Donna L
table/counter wipe-down PM		Mary Ann	Dody		Helen	Rachel
port-pots				Carolyn		
clean-out showers			Jessica Anna Anna		Barb Bright	
morning inspection						
evening decon					Ronate	
frashi	Barb	Andy	Andy	Andy		
outdoor info	Donna Sandi	Donna Sandi	Carolyn		Amanda Rosemary Anthony	

With the help of Diane, Jenn and I put up ceiling tiles all morning and all afternoon. It's a lot more work than I thought it would be, making sure everything fits, especially at the corners. But I feel like I've been so productive today, a lot more so than I was at Don's house where I was constantly looking for work to do, seeing if people needed help, and just waiting for time to pass. Jenn and I finished up the living room ceiling which was half finished already when we got there. Then we moved on to the kitchen ceiling. We still have some left to do for tomorrow, but we got a lot done. It's nice to see how much progress we've made and very satisfying to see the product of our labors.



In the meanwhile, Diane was scraping off the gunk on the porch railings so that it could be primed and Jimmy and William were putting plywood on the porch ceiling. Afterwards, they, along with Carolyn, moved on to the side of the house where they worked on the roof. Anne, Alison, and Diane primed the railings of the porch.



I think Jenn and I lucked out for not having to be outdoors at all. It was very hot this morning, but towards late afternoon, we could hear thunder and sense a storm coming. But only the wind blew and the temperature dropped to a more pleasant degree which actually made outside a lot cooler than inside. I'm just glad I didn't have to be out in the sun worsening my 'farmer's tan' and getting too many mosquito bites. I got a few, but not as many as I feared.

All in all, I'm pretty pleased about the work I did today, even though it became monotonous and sometimes tiring due to the raising of my arms for so long. Also, there was a lack of goggles so my eyes often got irritated when ceiling tile particles got in them - must remember to bring several pairs for tomorrow. The staple gun was annoying at times because it wouldn't staple right or the staple wouldn't come out, but it worked alright in the end.

After dinner, we got together as a whole group and had a debriefing session. We came up with suggestions on how to improve our volunteer experience and what non-governmental organizations such as TRAC can do to help it. As volunteers with little to none construction skills, having only one construction supervisor between two separate teams was very difficult. In those situations, to prevent material waste due to errors and potential self-injury, volunteers should seek fellow team members who seem to know more or has had past experience. One possible solution for the lack of on-site supervisors is to assign someone in the team to take on a leadership role. Asking a lot of questions, especially when in doubt, is key to tackling an otherwise daunting task. Volunteers should also be open to whatever sort of job is needed of them and do it with tolerance and patience.



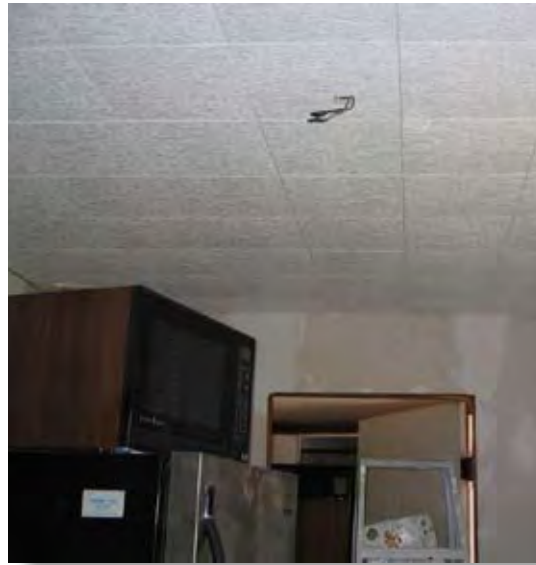
As for NGO's like TRAC, an agreement between homeowner and volunteer interaction in inhabited houses could help the volunteers a lot with the working conditions. The inconvenience of rearranging furniture and working around homeowners (as was the case in Jacob's house) could have been avoided. A lot of time and energy could have been saved and used elsewhere if the house was not inhabited or if the homeowners were absent during the work hours. Along with more on-site supervision, perhaps being told in the beginning who's who and the hierarchy of all the different organizations that ran the Volunteer Week would have helped us all understand what is happening and why. In general, more communication both instructional and informative would have improved our Volunteer Weeks. Overall, it was a good discussion and hopefully our feedback will help future volunteer efforts.



Friday the 21st

Our last day of work! I couldn't believe how fast this week flew by. Even though the first few days felt like forever, these last couple of days seemed like a blur. We originally planned to go see a house being lifted this morning, but when we got there, we were told that the workers were having frustrations and problems and it would have been rude to watch them, so we left.

At Jacob's house, Jenn and I finished the tiling on the kitchen ceiling. It took us right up until lunch time, but we finished. During our lunch break, we thought about visiting the "lifting" house again, but when we called, we found out that the workers had just left it unfinished with the house only three feet in the air. So we just ate at the work site again. Jacob and Renel came by and they brought with them two pit-bull and labrador mix puppies, adding to their family of their tiny dog, Killer, and three scrawny kittens. Although having the homeowners around can be frustrating at times, they are really friendly and entertaining to talk to.



For the rest of the day, Jenn, Diane, and I didn't have much to do because there weren't any usable tiles left to finish the bathroom ceiling so we just cleaned up and tidied up the tools and organized them so it'll be easier to pack them up when we leave. Alison and Anne finished up with the painting on the porch, stairs, and roof ceilings. Jimmy, Jeremy, and William worked on the porch and Carolyn and William put up some paneling on the sides of the house. And before we knew it, our last work day was over. We took some group photos and said our goodbyes and drove back to the Village.



Andrea cooked us a dinner of sausage gumbo and spaghetti with plenty of fresh string beans.



After dinner we all went to the Jolly Inn which we heard was a wholesome family place with line dancing and live Cajun music. We all enjoyed ourselves there, dancing and watching other people dance. Afterwards some people hopped over to Kathy Shaw's to sing some karaoke. It was a fun way of ending our Volunteer Week.



Saturday the 22nd

My flight was the earliest, departing at 11am. After many goodbyes to my fellow teammates, I left Louisiana once again, with the same bittersweet feeling of fulfillment I had when I left it last March. As I watched New Orleans grow smaller and smaller from my window seat view, I couldn't help but think that my past week has been such a worthwhile experience.



SIGUS 2006