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## MCC students help ease hard times in Big Easy

By:Christine McCluskey , Journal Inquirer

**If there's one thing the Manchester Community College students who visited New Orleans a few weeks ago want people to know, it's that life for most residents of the Big Easy is still very hard.**

The tourist-attracting French Quarter is doing fine, they say, but one doesn't have to look far beyond its borders to find neighborhoods where Hurricane Katrina hit much harder.

These are places where the houses are still ringed with lines that show how high the water rose, the street signs are still made out of cardboard, and people mow the grass around the bare foundations of their vanished homes so they won't be accused of neglecting the property and have the land taken away, too.

Spray-painted messages on ruins announce wishes to return: "This is my home."

Or, painted on trees in empty yards, acknowledgements of loss: "This was my home."

Manchester resident David Virone, 18, suggests closing your eyes and picturing your neighborhood. Then, "imagine all those houses gone. That's pretty much the Ninth Ward."

"They're still living the day of and the day after it hit," Christopher Hansen, 20, of Manchester says.

Sitting in a circle in a hallway at the college, a small group of the students can't stop giving examples of the lingering devastation they saw.

After studying the issues surrounding the 2005 hurricane's effects on the city, they traveled to New Orleans for a week to build Habitat for Humanity homes with AmeriCorps volunteers. When they got back, they met to talk about their experience.

The special three-week course, titled "Community Involvement - Relief Work in New Orleans," was created by MCC professor Lucy Anne Hurston, who teaches sociology.

Eight students from Great Path Academy, the magnet high school located at MCC, took the course with the 25 MCC students. Twelve faculty and staff members also went on the trip.

Donations from MCC faculty and staff members and several community organizations funded the trip. When they weren't building houses, the students took a tour of the city's most damaged areas with the Army Corps of Engineers and put together reports on the local culture.

Lavina Karunanidhi, 24, of Manchester says she visited a church where the congregation had gone from 65,000 to 18,000, because so many of those displaced by the hurricane have never been able to return.

They also met with students from Nunez Community College, where, Karunanidhi says, the students don't even have a bookstore - they have to purchase all their books elsewhere.

The MCC group also got a taste of what it's like to live in post-hurricane conditions; the camp where they stayed was a gutted former elementary school with exposed ceilings.

They drank canned "FEMA water" that technically expired around the fall of 2005, but was the best refreshment available when they were working and sweating out in the hot sun.

Morgan J. Beaudoin, 20, of Rocky Hill says Hurston told the group at the beginning, "If this class is done properly, it will change your life forever."

The students were skeptical of that, Beaudoin says, but changed their minds after the trip. The students say the course brought out a range of feelings that included pride in their new house-building accomplishments, disappointment in their government, and gratitude for what they have back home in Connecticut.

Beaudoin and fellow student Chloe Zeldner, 20, of Glastonbury said they're going to look into joining AmeriCorps, while Karunanidhi said she plans to join the Red Cross.

They hope to encourage others to visit the hurricane-affected areas or at least donate to organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. "A year from now, they're still going to need help," professor Stephania Davis says of the areas' residents.