

In October of 1998 I went on my first mission trip outside the United States. I went to Haiti. I went through a program sponsored by the hospital that I am employed at. I am a Medical Technologist in a small hospital in Portland, Maine. I spent the entire ten days wishing that I could bring all the children I saw, (while there I worked in a small laboratory at an orphanage), to the United States. After arriving back in Maine I never thought I would go on another medical mission trip. I was back in Haiti in 1999. In 2001 I went to Jamaica and 2002 to Guatemala. All medical missions. With each trip I went on I was convinced that the children I saw at the clinics would be better off in the United States. In 2004 I went to Honduras through the York Association of the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ. I was and am still working as a Medical Technologist, but by this time I was also the Director of Christian Education at a UCC church in Southern Maine. Something else was different about this trip. I was accompanied by one of my sons, then sixteen. There were two other sixteen year olds with us. It was on this trip that I realized that bringing these children to the United States wasn't the answer. The answer was to take youth on mission trips. I became a firm believer in the phrase "growing compassionate kids". That was the answer, to take youth outside their comfort zones and to give them the opportunity to experience the joy of giving back and helping others. I started with my own children. In 2005 I took my then fourteen year old son, Jeffrey to Honduras.

In the summer of 2006 I was asked to be a counselor at our conference church camp, Pilgrim Lodge. It was there that a teenager from New Orleans shared her photographs and story of what happened to her city after Hurricane Katrina and the levees breaking. Many youth from my local church also heard her story. We were all so touched by her pictures and her story that we knew we had to go to New Orleans and help her. We organized ourselves and with the help of the United Church of Christ South Central Disaster Relief Office located at Little Farms UCC in River Ridge we were on our way. Four adult chaperones and eighteen youth from six different UCC churches in the York Association traveled to New

Orleans in January of 2007, for a week of demolition. I knew this could be a life changing event for all of us and for our churches but didn't realize how deep the transformation would be felt.

We stayed at Good Shepherd UCC in Metarie. We spent each day going through people's personal property and depositing it on the street for trash pick up. Wearing hazmat suits, face masks and goggles we took pile after pile of insulation materials, linoleum, sheetrock and other debris out of these houses that at one time were people's homes. Each evening we spent time reflecting on our high's and low's for the day. We shared prayers and scripture and songs.

On the flight home there was a core group of five that decided that they couldn't wait another year to go back to New Orleans. They immediately started planning another trip. Eight youth and two adults spent a very hot week in July doing finishing work, painting and putting in doors for an elderly woman. For four of these ten this was their second trip. Jeff was one of the four. I was thrilled and amazed to see how focused and excited he was about planning and organizing this trip.

Between the January and July trips we kept our New Orleans connection alive. Those of us at First Parish put together a Sunday morning worship complete with photographs shown on our newly installed audio/visual equipment. Eleven of the youth attend Thornton Academy, our local high school. They put together a slideshow and shared their stories for their classmates. Gary Arndt, (the minister at Good Shepherd UCC in Metarie) and his wife Karen were in Ocean Park, (near Saco), that summer visiting friends. We invited them over for a Maine-New Orleans reunion. Gary and Karen shared stories about different scenarios where people were being helped by their church and by churches around the country. They also shared stories of just how great the need still was. One story that Karen, a teacher in a local school, shared was about children in need of equipment to play baseball. Before Jeff left for his July New Orleans mission trip he furiously went through his closet looking for his baseball glove. He was excited about giving it to someone that needed it.

In June we sent six adults and thirteen youth to General Synod where we attended the “Hope Shall Bloom” workshop and saw many of our New Orleans friends. We also brought books with us for the Book Ministry that puts books into the hands of New Orleans children through the efforts of Carolyn Mains a Good Shepherd UCC parishioner.

In the fall of 2007, several of our youth headed off to college. I have been told that one young woman changed her major to Sociology because she wants to work with people. One young man is in the Engineering program at University of Maine because he wants to learn more about levees and how to build better and stronger ones than what are now in effect in New Orleans and other places in the United States. He even spent his spring break in North Carolina doing a mission project. Both college students were on our January 2007 New Orleans trip.

Also in the fall, three of us traveled to Colby College in Waterville, Maine to attend an art exhibit titled: “Mama, I Don’t Know How to Draw Sad”. We spent time after talking to the women who put together this exhibit about New Orleans and our experiences there. It was there that I learned about the book “One Dead in Attic” by Chris Rose, a reporter for the Times-Picayunne, a New Orleans newspaper. At this same time plans were being put into motion for another York Association trip to New Orleans for January 2008. We did something different this time. We took two groups. One a youth contingent of eleven with two chaperones and the other contingent consisted of 23 adults. We represented eight churches in the York Association. We stayed at different host churches but worked together on the job sites. Several times during our week in New Orleans we would get together for dinner, reflections and sightseeing. For five of us this was our second New Orleans trip. For Jeff it was his third.

As I checked my email I would receive messages from Gary in New Orleans. In some of these messages I was asked to forward a thank you to my son Jeff. Unbeknown to me, Jeff had, on several occasions, sent gift cards from area stores to Gary to be used to help people that were affected by the events of

Katrina. Jeff never told anyone he had done that. Since he has a part time job he has some money coming in. I thought it was a fabulous way to spend the money.

After reading Chris Rose's book, "One Dead in Attic" I was blown away by its intensity. For anyone that has visited New Orleans after Katrina it really is hard to read. It is a very raw account of the city and its people in the first year post Katrina. The book consists of his writings from the Times-Picayunne column.

I recommended it to those going on the New Orleans Mission trip. On a whim I emailed Chris Rose at the Times-Picayunne to see if I could meet him and he would sign my book. I explained that we would be in New Orleans and that for some of us it would be our second trip. For Jeff it would be his third. I was ecstatic when I received an email from Chris Rose asking for an interview with Jeff, for a future column, in exchange for him signing my book. Being Jeff's mom, of course I said Yes.

On the last day of our week in New Orleans, Chris Rose came out to our job site on Michoud Boulevard. After introductions and a book signing he spent 45 minutes talking to Jeff. It was quite chilly that day and they sat in the front seat of one of our rented vans. The day before, Chris had sent a photographer out. Since I was not present at the interview I did not know the conversation. Like most teenagers Jeff was not overly forthcoming about the interview. Chris told us that it would probably be several weeks before the column was in the paper. It was Mardi Gras season and then Jazz Fest so we patiently waited.

On Sunday, March 2<sup>n</sup>, the day we shared our January 2008 trip with the congregation during morning worship, the story came out. It was more than just the usual column and was adorned with numerous pictures. What really hit me, though, was how well Jeff shared his heart and soul with this stranger. As a mom it was one of my proudest moments. This is a compassionate kid. This is what it is all about.

Jeffrey has always been my spiritual child. As a toddler and preschooler he would sing songs that he had heard at church. One Easter song he loved to sing had the words "...death has lost its sting". I remember one day as I was driving him to preschool he asked me, "mommy, what does that mean"?

When Jeff was four years old, he made this picture for me. It consisted of many lines but two lines had intersected and formed a cross. Jeffrey explained his picture this way. "Mommy, this is a cross and mommy I drew this cross to remind you of Jesus, because Mommy, I know that you love Jesus." I cried. I

also remember it, like it was yesterday when it happened. This was the same little boy that was constantly on the move, running out of the house and down the street only to be brought back by neighbors, the same little boy that, for several years in his young life, I woke up every morning and asked God to get me through one more day. And God did. Thank you, God.

Since the article came out in the Times-Picayune some amazing things have happened. Jeff received a handwritten letter, from an 84 year old women, from Jefferson, Louisiana. How sweet is that? She saw the article in the paper and wanted to personally thank Jeff. She sent him a copy of the article along with the letter. She addressed the envelope: to the high school in Saco, Maine. Not even a zip code was on the envelope. After receiving the letter we found her phone number and called her to personally thank her for her letter and a copy of the article. Jeff told her that when we come back in January 2009 we hope to come visit her. She was thrilled. Chris Rose also called her up. He wrote a column about her writing to Jeff to say thank you.

There is still so much to do in New Orleans. There is still many people without homes and many that will not be calling New Orleans their home any more. When Jeff and I hear or see the words New Orleans we don't see it as a place in Louisiana. We see faces of the people that live there. We see gutted out homes and Fema trailers. We see our brothers and sisters in Christ and we know we will be back. For New Orleans is in our heart and soul.

As Jeff and I walked in the French Quarter last January, he said to me, "it is so good to be here". Jeff has one more year before he is off to college. He is looking at Political Science or Criminal Justice for a major. I don't believe he knows what he would like to become but I know that already he has become a compassionate young man with a soft voice and a warm and caring heart. What more could a mother ask for?

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