



Center for Cooperative Principles

Youth to Youth Bear Hugs Project

The Road to New Orleans: A Journey of the Heart

The Youth to Youth Bear Hugs Project began at a meeting of youth and adults in Vermont in May of 2005 and led to New Orleans in June of 2006. The recognition of the emotional suffering and trauma caused by disasters sparked the group to create a project for youth to support other children and youth who had suffered tragedy and loss after the immediate survival and safety needs have been met.

Last fall children and youth from groups and organizations around the country wrote personal notes and ordered teddy bears to be given to children in New Orleans who were impacted by Katrina and for children in Thailand who had been impacted by the Tsunami.

In the middle of June, Liz Mooney, a high school student from Colchester, and I traveled to New Orleans for two days to distribute the teddy bears and notes to children. We spent the first day with our New Orleans contact, Diana and her husband Peter touring the area. We heard the amazing story of how they survived hurricane Katrina and the story of their evacuation through the flooding and chaos. They consider themselves lucky. Their friends and families are alive and they still have their home, although it has lost much of its value. Approaching retirement, an educational consultant, and a lawyer, they have both lost their careers, as they have no clients left. They are planning to relocate and start their lives over if they can sell their house. We heard several other accounts as well, but no one else as well off.

The flooding in their city, Metairie, was a result of the fact that the people in charge of the pumping stations were sent miles away. When it became clear that the town was in danger, the pumpers were unable to return. No one left knew the codes for the pumps and Metairie was flooded with the backwash of Katrina. Sharks and crocodiles were swimming in the streets. No one was allowed to return for five weeks, so houses stood in flood waters for all that time. Months later in this area only moderately affected there was FEMA trailer after FEMA trailer in yards, as many people still cannot inhabit their homes.

Diana and Peter took us on a tour of the devastation and there is no other word for it. Miles and miles of destruction on a scale that is unimaginable. All I could think was that this is what it must look like in a war zone and my mind went to what it must be like for the people in Iraq. The worst areas are piles of rubble. In the wreckage of what was once a house stood a washer filled with the clothes that were being washed when the levy broke destroying everything in its path. Personal images such as this brought home the raw experience that people were killed in an instant in this combination of natural disaster and human failure.



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Right where one of the levies broke Diana pointed out an empty field. She related that a friend's daughter's house used to be in the field, which had only ten months ago been a neighborhood. Her friend was on the phone with his daughter after the hurricane making sure she was okay. While talking, the phone went dead. The levy had broken. No trace of her, her house, or any of her belongings have ever been found. Two thousand seven hundred people are still missing and are not expected to be found or recovered.

Neighborhood after neighborhood, house after house, you could see the floodwater level stains on the houses. They showed the height that the water reached and the varying levels it stood at as it slowly receded over a three-month period. First we passed street after street where the water stood at a 3-4 foot level for months. It was riveting to imagine that much water for miles and miles.

Then we came to area after area where the watermark was at the top of the first floor or roof area. Entire houses had been submerged in water. Many of those houses had holes in the roofs that people had hacked or sawed desperate to make an opening through which to crawl to escape the water filling their attics. Staring at the houses with no holes, I wondered if the people who lived there had evacuated, or, if they had been the people who could not imagine that the water could come that high and who had retreated to the attic with no means to escape and had been trapped and drowned in the rising water.

The area is a somber wasteland on which almost every building is written the story of destruction or death. We passed hundreds and hundreds of homes and buildings marked with the spray painted symbols that told the stories of the dates they were searched, any animals that were found and the number of people that were found either alive or dead.

We drove through other areas that were ghost towns. McDonalds, houses, businesses, warehouses, simply block after block of buildings left uninhabitable after the flooding. It was eerie to be in places that were obviously vibrant, busy and full of people now devoid of life or any future. Miles left deserted. The experience stunned me and I could not imagine what is was like for Diana and Peter to drive through their city with the images of the past, the places they used to visit, stores they went to, places they worked, neighborhoods where friends and family used to live now either abandoned, obliterated or mounds of rubble.

Ten months after Katrina there are still areas without water and electricity. People are trying to reclaim what is left of their lives in these areas. The mayor has declared these parts of New Orleans now "outside the footprint of the city". There are no fire, police or city services in these areas. People there are left to fend for themselves, most with nowhere else to go.



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The city of New Orleans is struggling to come to life. The main post office just opened 3 weeks ago. In dozens of freeway underpasses are thousands of twisted, crushed, and rusted out cars. They have been dumped and abandoned since last August.

For three months, New Orleans was submerged in water filled with raw sewage, decaying animal and human remains, fluids from hundreds of thousands of automobiles, Freon leaking from thousands of refrigerators, and chemicals of all kinds from thousands of homes, garages and businesses. As the water receded it contaminated every surface it touched and leached into the soil. Still, there exists no decontamination plan to address the toxic state of the living environment in New Orleans.

As if all that I have already described were not enough, I had not considered the devastating economic effects of this scope of disaster and systems breakdown. What few businesses are open are struggling to find people to work. There are few places to live for the people who are willing to work. Burger King in Metairie is paying \$15 an hour and a \$120 bonus each week that employees show up to work every day. Local businesses can't compete with those wages and are either folding or leaving the state. In the fall, the foreclosures begin. Three hundred thousand foreclosures are scheduled.

Only 21 out of 125 schools opened in April. The federal funds designated for the schools have not been allocated or distributed and so the children have been roaming the streets for months. Much of the money raised has not been distributed yet as state and local officials cannot agree on how to spend it. Report after report of corruption and incompetence are on a scale that is simply unbelievable. There is very little that is hopeful or of promise for the people of New Orleans.

Some parts of the city and locale are coming to life; however, the absolute systemic breakdown of life on every level has left its trace everywhere. Many people are still in shock, most feel utterly forgotten, some are without hope and many are desperate. It is true that given the size of Hurricane Katrina even if the clean up, recovery and reorganization efforts were running optimally this situation would take a long time to set right. However, it is undeniable that here in the United States, the wealthiest and most technologically advanced country in the world that after our initial outpouring of help and concern that we have forgotten the people of New Orleans and left their lives in a shambles.

The second day Liz and I visited two schools and gave 600 teddy bears to children at the schools. I was so grateful to have seen what we saw and to understand to a greater degree what the children and staff of these schools have lived through and what they face in working to rebuild their lives. I was honored to meet the staff and teachers of these schools who in the midst of absolute chaos are organizing and opening schools to serve and educate the children.



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They truly are among of the heroes of New Orleans! People who themselves have been traumatized, and yet who come together in the midst of ongoing crisis and refuse to give in to discouragement or to be defeated by all that is not working and who are building a future for the children, for our children.

We arrived at the school and the youngest children gathered in the basement. I wondered what to say to these children and adults who have braved experiences beyond anything that I could relate to in my life. Yet, in such moments it is best to stick with the simple truth. Liz and I were introduced.

I said that we came to share the caring and goodwill of children from around the country, boys and girls who knew that they had been through many difficulties as a result of Katrina. They wanted to let the children know they cared and had written notes attached to teddy bears and that they each would receive a bear. I explained that the children ordered teddy bears, paying for them with money that they had raised or that they earned. First and second graders from New Hampshire did extra chores at home to earn the six dollars to order a bear. A young girl from Missouri told her friends not to bring her presents for her birthday but to bring six dollars for a bear and they decorated the tags for the bears at the party. Braintree Elementary in Vermont raised enough money to send a note and bear from every child in the school.

I shared that most of us will not experience a hurricane like Katrina but that everyone experience challenges and times when they need support in life. Sometimes we are the people who give support and sometimes we are the people who need support. Life is a cycle of sharing and when we give and help when we are able and receive when we need to, we participate in creating a beautiful and caring world.

We handed out the bears to one child at a time. Some children were excited, hugging and snuggling their teddy bear, some quietly comforted their teddy bear, some of the older youth were awkward and unsure of how to receive the teddy bear, some children were quiet and withdrawn and a few seemed lost inside themselves. It was a piercing experience to look into the eyes of these children and see the depth of trauma and suffering some of them carry. I wondered. "How they will heal through all that they have experienced and all that they face ahead?"

As we finished handing out the bears, the principal came up and said that the teachers wanted to know if they could have teddy bears also, that touched my heart to its very depths. We gave teddy bears to everyone who wanted one! The custodian had stayed with the boxes of bears the entire time we were at the school. As we were leaving, I could feel a tug at my heart. As we loaded the truck, I asked the custodian if he had children and he said no. I told the security guard to take some bears if he had children.



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Then the custodian said, "I have grandchildren."

"Take a bear."

He said, "I have three grandchildren."

"Take three or as many as you like."

As he choose three bears, I could hardly bear to think that while he watched us give these beautiful bears out to 400 children he was thinking about his three grandchildren, but wouldn't ask for anything for them.

Over and over people said that they couldn't believe that people cared about them. They were so appreciative of the generosity and caring of children from all over the country who sent a teddy bear and note of encouragement to someone they didn't know. The teddy bears were a cuddly gift, but it was the personal note written by a child that communicated with such depth to people that they had not been forgotten.

This was not a trip of pity or a project of soggy well wishing. I heard somewhere that goodwill is "love in action". This project was and is in its essence a journey of goodwill, bearing the gifts of caring from the heart of one child to another. We will continue our work in New Orleans and around the world to link youth with youth in a tapestry of connection, compassion and action in creating a world that reflects the very best of who we are.

Wherever you live, ponder on the people of New Orleans and the other areas affected by Katrina. Are any of us, or our children immune to this? Are there tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, blizzards, drought, forest fires, or other danger where you live? The perils of nature are a part of life that we all live with. The perils of indifference, selfishness and hard heartedness are situations we create.

Let us choose a new direction for our present world and a new image for our future. It requires each of us to open our hearts, to see things clearly as they are, and to dare to act. And let us begin today.

Patty Roeding, President
Center for Cooperative Principles
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If you would like to participate, have questions or would like to support the Youth to Youth Bear Hugs Project please contact: patty@centerforcooperativeprinciples.org