

Day #1- February 15

It's 10:15 PM in New Orleans, the end of a long and exhilarating day. The teens have settled into their rooms and lights are out. Everyone's quite exhausted but looking forward to getting to work tomorrow helping to New Orleans to rebuild.

The flight from New Jersey and arrival in New Orleans were uneventful. We were met by Don, our driver, an energetic and proud lifelong New Orleans resident who gave us a good introduction to this unique city as he drove our group to the Church of the Annunciation. After settling in our rooms (we're staying in a church boarding house in Broadmoor), we had our first group meeting devoted to ice breakers and discussing the elements of a strong teen community. We made and ate lunch in the main dining room, and said Birkat Hamazon. It was an important lesson for our teens to learn that they need not be embarrassed or self-conscious about their Judaism in a public setting. We stressed that those who observed us reciting Birkat would be intrigued at how another religious group worships.

After lunch we set out for a tour of New Orleans led by Louis Sheaperd, member of the Board of Directors of Beacon of Hope. Louis is a lifelong New Orleans resident who captivated the group with stories of how Katrina devastated the city and how the federal government failed to respond efficiently and promptly. We stopped at Beth Israel Orthodox Synagogue, now just an empty building up for sale (the congregation is now davening in a Reform synagogue until it can rebuild). The teens were stunned to see the horizontal "water line" some 10 feet about the ground across the exterior walls of the building (they couldn't reach the line even when straining their arms upward). We visited a new neighborhood of colorful houses built for musicians and saw Brad Pitt's development project. The teens came away with a clear sense of the extent of damage caused by the hurricane and the struggle to rebuild that New Orleans residents face every day.

We then made our way to the Aquarium for some fun and to pass the time until the 5:00 PM showing of Hurricane on the Bayou, an IMAX film that tells the story of how the erosion of the wetlands compounded the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. From there it was off to dinner at the Kosher Cajun. It's Mardi Gras time in New Orleans, and a parade was passing by the restaurant. Our group ran outside for front row seats to view the parade and enjoy the atmosphere. We came back inside to celebrate Matt Lebow's birthday with a cake.

After returning to the church, we had a group meeting during which teens gave their impressions of the day and expressed their feelings. It was rewarding to see how much they had learned and internalized from the day's experience.

Tomorrow we spend most of the day working with two families to help them rebuild their homes and installing CFL light bulbs in homes around the city. The group is coming together in a nice way, forming a closely knit community and eager to begin helping.

Day #2- February 16

Day #2 of our visit, a 16 hour marathon of work, camaraderie, reflection and fun to New Orleans, has ended.

Our day began with a wakeup call at 6:00 AM- sounds early, but a 10:00 PM curfew insured that everyone got eight hours of sleep. Breakfast began at 6:30 (we're eating some of what is offered at the Church of the Annunciation and supplementing with additional kosher food), and was followed by wonderful davening led by two of our staff members, Adam and Maital. We boarded our bus at 8:15 AM for the work site, where we were met by a representative from Beacon of Hope. Today's project was to paint one of the buildings and the bleachers at a park in an area called Lakeview. 24 enthusiastic teens using rollers and brushes nearly completed the first coat on the exterior walls.

By noon, we left for City Park where we enjoyed lunch and some personal time outdoors. We then made our way to GreenLight, a nonprofit organization that seeks to install CFL bulbs in homes around the city. Eligible families register on the GreenLight website and are visited by a team of volunteers who change their bulbs to ones that do not leave a carbon footprint. One group of teens had a chance to talk with Michael Knight, a survivor of the flood and a student in a continuing education program at the DSCEJ, the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University (we were changing bulbs in the Center's off campus headquarters). Mr. Knight's experience as a boater who rescued stranded people in the weeks following the hurricane are noted in the book [The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast](#), and his remarks were animated and memorable.

Following our afternoon with GreenLight, we went back to City Park for an hour long study and discussion session on tzedakah and the essence and goals of Jewish social service projects. Members of the group enthusiastically shared their thoughts and ideas. Leaving City Park, we headed for dinner at the Kosher Cajun (same restaurant as

last night, but different choices). After time to shower, the group gathered once again to reflect and spend time with one another before lights out.

Tomorrow will be similar, with a morning work project (which we expect will flow into the early afternoon) in someone's home. During lunch we will meet with Jonathan Leit, son of Oheb Shalom members Stephen and Carole Leit, who is a New Orleans resident specializing in urban planning.

Day #3- February 17

Day #3 here in New Orleans has ended with our teens feeling accomplished and proud. We've had a busy day filled with work, conversation and study, and some fun in the New Orleans sun! Here are the highlights:

- We began the day at 6:00 A.M. and had breakfast, made our lunches and enjoyed spirited davening. We've learned new melodies and explored the meaning of several of our prayers. As yesterday, we boarded the bus at 8:15 A.M. sharp.
- Our first stop was a home supported by Beacon of Hope and our mission was to apply a second coat of paint to the exterior walls and trim, paint the master bedroom and clean the front and back yard. Connie, a Beacon of Hope representative, spoke to our teens about how the recovery work being done helps not to finish a home but to finish a life. By lending a helping hand, our teens helped a family to feel rooted again in their lives in New Orleans and not always waiting for a final step to complete their recovery from disaster. The teens worked hard painting, moving debris, weeding and mowing the lawn. We finished our work and headed for lunch exhausted but proud.
- Lunch in City Park was a time for reflection and some fun. A few of our teens played football, some relaxed and read, others talked quietly. We enjoyed the sun and some ice cream.
- We spent time with Jonathan Leit, son of Stephen and Carol Leit and resident of New Orleans. Jonathan is an urban planner who works with non-profit agencies to secure funding for projects. After catching up on the latest news from Millburn High School (where our guest attended years ago), Jonathan spoke to our group about the importance of volunteerism to recovery and some of the ways in which New Orleans residents are dealing with the disaster. His

presentation was quite engaging and the teens had numerous questions. Thanks to Jonathan for taking time out of his busy schedule to meet with us!

- After our time in City Park, we headed back to “home base” to get cleaned up and ready for dinner. We ate at Casablanca, a wonderful Mediterranean restaurant in Metairie.
- When we returned to our base, we had a group meeting. The focus was on finding ways to share this experience with those we will meet and talk to in the days ahead. We reviewed all that we had done and discussed the deeper meaning and implications of our experiences. We discussed the importance of describing what we’ve seen and done. Teens were asked to complete sentences (in writing) that begin with “I met some who...”, “Did you know that...” “I learned that...” and “Can you believe that...” The exercise was designed to help teens to organize their thinking and formulate responses to the questions they will be asked about what they did in New Orleans.
- We gave the teens an extra hour to “hang out” and enjoy each other’s company (after packing and cleaning their rooms!). Everyone went to bed tired but happy.

Day #4- February 18

Our final day has been busy and fun. We began our day, as usual, at 6:00 AM, had breakfast, made lunch and had lively, spirited davening. Despite the early hour, the teens enjoy the singing, guitar playing and feeling created in our prayer community.

We left our home base after signing a t-shirt commemorating our stay at the Church of the Annunciation that is to be placed on the walls in the boarding house hallway. We made our way to the French Quarter of New Orleans and tour the Presbyter Museum which relates the history of the Mardis Gras. The teens met a member of Zulu, someone who is in charge of dancing and costumes. The teens were thoroughly engaged and delighted with the visit. After that, everyone had some free time to shop and enjoy kosher beignets at Café Du Monde. After making some presentations to our group leaders and a final group photo, we made our way to the airport. We’ve checked in for our flight and are waiting at the gate.