

## **The Hands and Feet of God**

### Days 1 & 2: The Journey Begins

Keith and I spent a total of 24 hours in the car with Brynee and Felicia on the way down to New Orleans. How was it? The girls slept a lot. (Felicia snores and makes the cutest little popping noises!) We played “The Alphabet Game,” and the “License Plate Game,” and Keith and I were entertained by wonderful inspirational and educational youth songs learned in VanderKamp, such as “On a day like this, clap clap, snap snap, Whoop Whoop, Boogie Boogie, etc., etc., etc.” The first night at St. Anne's in Bristol, VA was spent on sleeping bags on hard floors (although some lucky stiffs had air mattresses --- the rest of us were just stiff!). Back on the road again for day two and more of the same, with one surprising exception. When we stopped for a potty break in an out-in-the-back-of-beyond location near Bay Springs, Mississippi, Brynee spotted a van in the parking area of a Shell station. Low and behold, it was a group of travelers from United Methodist Church in Liverpool (the church with the purple door) who were also on their way to New Orleans to help with rebuilding. We stopped and visited for a while. This chance meeting had us chattering about it a good portion of the remainder of the trip. By 8 pm that Sunday night, we finally arrive at Bethlehem Volunteer Center in New Orleans, only 8 minutes outside the downtown area and French Quarter.

Prior to being ravaged by hurricane Katrina, the volunteer center housed the Bethlehem Children's Center, an affiliate of Lutheran Social Services. The Center had provided help, healing, and hope to troubled boys and girls. Now run with the help of Lutheran Disaster Response, or LDR as they call themselves, the large gymnasium has been turned into housing for volunteers from across the country. It is still providing help and hope – but to the entire New Orleans community. It contains men's and women's barracks, showers (hot and cold!), toilets and a gathering room. Meals were served at the campus next door run by Prince of Peace – a Missouri Synod facility. We arose each day at 6am (or earlier for some) for breakfast at 6:30am. Lunches were provided each day and dinner was at 5:30pm. The leader of this effort, Katie, ran this operation with a steel fist and a heart of gold. Truly called to mission in this place, she shared morning and evening devotions with us that were taken from a book that contained the thoughts of numerous volunteers who had come before us to be the Hands and Feet of God in this storm-ravaged area. Each day, the bible verse and words and thoughts of previous volunteers prepared us for what we were about to face and later, confirmed what we had experienced that day. It was like magic to hear our own feelings put into words by people we'd never met. Or was it magic? No... it was the Holy Spirit among us.

### Day 3: Orientation Then Off to Lady Gray

Listening to Katie's two-hour orientation on Monday morning was numbing. So much information! PLEASE tell me that she really means Dust Mask when she says Respirator!? Get your teams together there is SO MUCH to do! Katie's mantra: YOU MUST DRINK AT LEAST SIX BOTTLES OF WATER A DAY. How are we ever going to drink six 20 ounce bottles of water a day? We soon learned we'd drink just that – and more!

After the orientation, we “geared up” for our various jobs. If you were “gutting,” you needed three layers of gloves, a protective suit that covered you from head to foot, a respirator – and no... it was not just a dust mask. This contraption served to filter out fine particles of wallboard, dust and mold as you were destroying a home's interior. It also acted as a reservoir for beads of sweat that pooled under your chin and sloshed around in there until you emptied it out. Too graphic? Tough! You wore protective goggles and either heavy work boots or firemen's boots that fit over your sneakers. All this in 90 plus degree heat. Our team was sent to a home on a street named Lady Gray. Working in cooperation with Noah Rescue, LDR was trying to find the owner. We'll just call her by her first name – Merrill. Merrill and her family had dropped out of sight after signing the permission papers to gut the house. The adults on the job, Bobbi Schnoor, Kyle Marie Cook, Pastor Paul and myself, headed a team of youth. Pastor Paul, Bobbi, and Kyle Marie tackled the downstairs gutting and I and the youth were assigned to the upstairs apartment to empty out all the furnishings, mattresses, and other items. I was assigned KP duty – the kitchen area. A large thermometer I found in these stuffy, dim, and closed-in quarters read 88 degrees when I glanced at it after first arriving. I made a point not to look at it again during the rest of the day!

A short long story... I learned so much about Merrill that day. She taught others how to become dental assistants. She collected pins from every state in the union. She was into sewing. She saved cards and letters from friends and family and she had tons of photos. I found her old drivers license and knew what she looked

like and in pictures saw her holding a newborn – saw her on a family vacation – and on an evening out. By the clothes in the closets (all of which were tossed) we learned that she had great taste and loved pocket books! During breaks we shared what we had learned about her or her family. Kyle Marie told us that one downstairs bedroom definitely belonged to a baby boy. The ceilings were painted sky blue with puffy little clouds on them. Vandals had done a job on the downstairs, but a multitude of Merrill's belongings had survived in the upstairs and I was determined to save what I could in hopes she would one day be found. I told Kyle I'd feel blessed to see the look on her face when she realized there were those who cared enough to salvage what they could of what remained of her broken home. I held little hope, however, of that ever happening.

I felt like an intruder. We all did. I was pawing through another person's life and kept thinking, "This could be me. One day, someone may be going through my cherished possessions. Will they feel the same as I do right now? Will they cry like I am... right now and keep praying to God for strength and understanding like I'm doing... right now? Please God... don't make me keep asking why. Make me ask how... how can I help?" You are helping, was the thought that came to mind. My next thought? It doesn't feel like it. Help me to understand. Be near us all. But most importantly...be with Merrill and her family.

The pile outside on the curb continued to grow. Caustic materials were separated from bedding and clothing which was separated from furniture and scraps of interior wood and wallboard. We were building a mountain on Lady Gray. The kids worked tirelessly. The adults downstairs kept up a constant cacophony of noise as they ripped down wallboard – one room at a time. I continued to become involved in Merrill's history. So much was stored there in that kitchen area in drawers and on shelves. The room, of course, was chaos. There was still a bucket of water under the sink to catch water from drippy pipes. You're right... it wasn't a pretty sight. Boxes of food were still on the counter tops that had been feasted on by the rodents who had become subsequent residents after Katrina hit and who had left their "calling cards" everywhere. I found a heavy-duty plastic furniture cover that I used as a garbage container and carried bag after bag of old boxed food and outdated canned food down to the curb. Clump, bang, rattle... there goes another load of garbage down the stairs and out to the curb. Lady Gray Mountain is getting bigger.

We were forewarned about scavengers at that morning's orientation. Do not confront them. Whatever is on the curb is fair game. The youth were so sad to be tossing perfectly good clothes, shoes, boots, and other items of the like away, but these were not salvageable due to the mold in the downstairs and the length of time they'd been in the house. Katie's warnings made me feel leery about scavengers, but on one trip out to the curb with my unusable garbage, I obviously scared off two Spanish speaking gentlemen, whom I quickly called back. Please, I begged them, take whatever you want. It made us all feel better knowing someone might get some use out of these items. These people weren't scary and frightening after all... they were God's children looking for a way to survive.

We had been provided with a small tent structure by the Bethlehem Campus for shade and we four "adults" started assembling it to gain some respite from the sun and brutal heat. We must have looked like Moe, Larry, Curley and Company putting that darned thing together! Tears mixed with laughter. The Holy Spirit was most certainly in that place on that day. It was a long, hot, sticky and emotionally wrought day. The youth were wonderful. I swear Ellen Pavlacka is related to the Pink Energizer Bunny. She just keeps going, and going... and going!

Multiple water breaks – insisted upon by Bobbi Schnoor (she is one tough taskmaster!), a lunch break, and more work – and so our day went.

#### Day 4: Charlie's House on Milan Street

I so wanted to go back to the house on Lady Gray on Tuesday, but the leaders needed me elsewhere. I gave instructions to Kyle Marie as to where I had left off in the kitchen at Lady Gray as she was returning there with the other adults. I wanted to make sure Merrill's possessions were handled with care.

After our turn at cleaning the campus in the morning, Courtney, Gina, Caitlin and I were assigned to go to Charlie's house on Milan Street to prime and paint the front **porch** and, according to Cookie (Mark Cook for those of you who don't know our endearment for him – although after I saw what I saw when we got there, I'm not sure I was thinking of him in endearing terms at that point). So... the front porch and a "small set of back steps." Cookie had lead up the team that was there the previous day. These small set of steps turned out to be stairs leading to the second story with a multitude of landings and up and down stairs on the lower level. Thanks, Cookie! Remind me to never ask you for a "small" piece of pie at our next church picnic.

Not much had been accomplished the previous day at Charlie's house due to a late start and the assembly, and subsequent taking down of rickety scaffolding. Cookie refused to let his team of girls climb the three floors of dangerous scaffolding... and rightly so. Yesterday, once priming had started, only two small areas on the front porch – **which turned out to be a huge wrap-around veranda** – were completed before they ran out of primer. Today, with new primer, brushes and rollers and paint trays that we insisted they get for us on hand, we started to work. A team of local folks who had been working on the plumbing at Charlie's house were there and between them and the nice man across the street who was also working on refurbishing a home we were provided with music and company. Shortly after starting to work, however, a dog showed up. We learned later that she was a stray and had been around the neighborhood for over a month. She obviously needed nourishment and some attention. She was a beautiful brown and black young female Rotweiler. Her tail was bobbed so she had belonged to someone at some point when she was younger. She was very friendly *and...* she wouldn't leave us alone. We managed from time-to-time to shoo her away from the area with the help of the workers, but she kept coming back. She'd step in the paint trays and even drank the paint. After a while she was covered with white paint as we attempted to push her out of the way with our paint-stained hands. We gave her water off to the side of the yard and hoped to keep her at bay. We did, however, manage to cover a lot of ground – or veranda I should say. At one point, the dog got to be too much and I chased her across the street – pushing her rump and stomping my feet. What a sight that must have been! She looked so forlorn and I felt like the meanest person in the world! Gina, who had taken an especial liking to the dog, glared daggers at me!

We gained only a short respite, however. After returning from across the street and picking up my paint brush, I turned as Gina screamed "No! No!" I heard the sound of the truck as it sped down the street in front of the house, and saw what Gina had seen coming. The dog entered the street. The driver slowed, but never stopped. The dog yelped and Gina ran hysterical to the other girls who were by the water cooler in the front yard and they huddled together in tears. I ran across the street and people came from everywhere. The plumbers – the man across the street with the music who had been up on a ladder... they all came. We found the dog on the front porch of a house where she was laying down. One of her rear legs was badly damaged and she was panting hard. One man warned me not to go near her or she'd bite me. I paid no attention. It was my fault she had been injured. I had chased her across the street. I had to do something. The dog did me no harm and welcomed my touch. I was concerned as she started to foam at the mouth and tried desperately to reach the SPCA. There was no answer. Eventually the dog got up and started to limp around. She sought refuge under a nearby house in the shade. Gina cried for almost two hours, but she continued bravely to work, being comforted by Courtney and Caitlin. When one of the workers came to us and said he'd been thinking about taking her home for weeks, we urged him to do so. We even had a name for him. We said he should call her Gina and referred to "our" dog as Little Gina after that. After a lunch break we got back to work. Things went very well for a while. The plumbers gave us Gatorade and one of the workers who were there to weed whack (the lawn areas are too small to mow) offered to help us paint... and he did. He told us his name was Stephan and that he had grown up in this neighborhood. He and his family had evacuated to Houston when Katrina hit and they had only recently returned. They were still not able to live in their ruined home. The plumbers gave us MORE Gatorade... thank you SO much!

Finally finished priming on the front veranda, Gina and I joined Courtney and Caitlin in priming the "*small*" back stairs. They'd covered a lot of area and things were going "swimmingly." My face, back and arms were burning under the hot sun so I applied sun screen. Little Gina had obviously gotten her second wind and found her way back across the street and into the back yard. There was no way to keep her out. The side yard was the largest open area on the property and held a kidney shaped swimming pool. As you might imagine, this was filled with rancid water and floating debris including a thick layer of green algae. Despite our efforts to keep her away, Little Gina jumped into the pool and a screaming big Gina ran in the opposite direction with Courtney at her heels. Why have they abandoned us I wondered? Calling to Little Gina and trying to coax her to the far end of the pool where the stairs were, I wasn't having much luck. I was also yelling, "Courtney! Gina! Where are you, we need you?!" The dog kept going under. She couldn't move one of her hind legs and was probably in terrible pain. She was swallowing that awful water and a look of terror was on her face. She mirrored our own. Caitlin grabbed a broom that was leaning against the side of the house and somehow got Little Gina's attention. In the meantime, the other girls had run to the man across the street on the ladder for help. By the time he arrived, Caitlin had managed to entice the dog to the pool stairs where she paused to catch her breath before attempting to work her way out of the pool. This chaos happened within the span of five minutes but it seemed like an eternity and we thought we'd lost Little Gina a number of times. Each time she went under, it took her longer to resurface. After this, it was impossible to keep her away from us. She kept rubbing up against us and we, although concerned for the dog, were also apprehensive about what kind of germs she was carrying on her coat from the putrid water. She began to vomit. In the meantime, the sweat had been falling in my eyes despite the fact that I was wearing a baseball cap and had carried the chemicals from the sunscreen along with it. I was

blinded and my eyes were burning. One more attempt to call the SPCA and we got a recording. I tried to leave a message about Little Gina a number of times but kept getting cut off. Finally, I was able to give an address and a description of her and let them know she'd been hit by a truck and almost drowned, pleading with them to send someone to find her and help her.

I could no longer work without being able to see through burning eyes that were streaming tears and the girls were spent from the heat and the emotions of the day. We were cleaning up just as one of the work supervisors, Daryl, stopped by. He held Little Gina while we got in the car and took off. She wanted to come with us. And yes... we wanted her to come, too. Courtney was our navigator and got us home. I drove with tears streaming down my face – for more reasons just the burning chemicals in my eyes. Courtney shared her thoughts with us. She said she was feeling a bit guilty because she knew we were here to help the people of New Orleans – and she felt we were doing that – but for her, today took on a new meaning. It was about a dog. A dog our group had come to know and care about. A dog we named Gina. Gina reminded us that humans weren't the only refugees of hurricane Katrina. No one disagreed with her.

#### Day 5: Meeting Merrill

After sea-sawing back-and-forth about where I was going to be needed, I ended up going back to the house on Lady Gray, along with Keith, Pastor Paul, Kyle Marie, Justin Erdley, Rachael Herpich and a different set of youth. There were eleven of us in all. It was a big job. The previous day's crew had managed to remove all the kitchen items to the downstairs "saving area" the day before. Our goals were laid out by Kyle Marie and we got to work. Once again, breaking through wallboard, tearing down ceilings, pulling paneling off the living room wall before removing wallboard, scraping up tile and ceramic tile floors, etc., etc., etc. Everyone was "suited" up and looked like earth-bound ET's – and sweating bullets! Lady Gray Mountain had continued to grow at the curb. One wall of the living room was decorated with a 70's style shiny wallpaper in shades of brown and green muted circles. It was ironic that once the wallboard was removed and turned over, it had the same design and color scheme of the wallpaper. It was little things such as this that helped us amuse ourselves as we went about this serious work. That and the fact that Christmas decorations, small toys, and monopoly money was falling from the ceiling in the room with the blue sky and puffy clouds. The attic area just above it still held remnants of some stored-away items.

On one of our required water breaks, I was sitting on one of the prime seats in the yard – a portable geriatric potty that had been rescued from the second floor. I was having a conversation with Justin. I remarked that he had many of his father's affectations, to which he tilted his head (just like his dad) and replied, "Say again?" (just like his dad). Kyle Marie agreed with me and we began to extol his virtues. I added that he also had had his father's kind and gentle ways, to which he replied, "You've both obviously never *lived* with my father!" More laughter. Thank you, God.

Then we got a surprise visit from Katie. They'd found the homeowner. What joy! In speaking with neighbors the previous day, Kyle Marie and her crew managed to get a phone number for Merrill's son-in-law. Between that and some other "serendipitous events" as Bobbi phrased it, Merrill had been located and was coming over to the house. How should we act around her? How was I going to react? Here was the wish I'd asked for coming to fruition, but how would Merrill take seeing her beautiful home in such ruinous conditions? Katie warned us she may be angry and take her frustrations out on us. She would definitely be emotional.

When Merrill drove up and got out of her car, I knew her immediately. She had aged some from the photos I'd seen, but wouldn't anyone given what she'd been through over the past two years? She stood beside the car in disbelief. Her shoulders sagged. She looked at Lady Gray Mountain... she looked defeated. She started walking towards the entrance to the front door and towards the dust and noise of demolition. I followed Kyle Marie out to greet her and we enfolded her in our arms and let her cry for a short while. The crew inside the house went about their work, but more quietly. They stole concerned looks out the windows... then busied themselves again. Merrill told us she had taken ill after the hurricane and had been through four surgeries in the past two years. Kyle didn't waste much time and got straight to work at being not only the hands and feet, but the words of God as she sought to comfort this woman. In a way, I wish I could have recorded the conversation and Kyle's subsequent prayer as we stood together with our arms around one another in that tremendous heat. Yet, at the same time, I was glad I wasn't able to do so. It was a moment similar to that of seeing a wisp of smoke – you see it and know was there, but are committed to remembering it from then on because it seemed so ethereal and was gone so soon. It's like the times when you wonder if God has actually spoken to you or if those were your own thoughts... or was there really a difference between the two? I told Scarlett later that Kyle Marie should have gone into ministry and as soon as I'd said it, realized that she already had. I told Scarlett that

Kyle's words had come straight from the heart. Scarlett replied, "I don't think so. They came from the Holy Spirit." And she was right.

Merrill met almost everyone on the crew that day and we gave her quite time to go through the house. She looked like a sleep walker. She put names to some of the photos we'd been able to salvage and showed us a picture of Mason, who turned one shortly after Katrina struck. Mason will be three in September. It was his bedroom that had the blue sky ceiling and white puffy clouds. From then on in, it was, "Have we finished with the wallboard in Mason's room yet?" Or, "Did we sweep up Mason's room?" Some of the girls helped Merrill carry some valuables to her car. Becky was so gentle. "Is there anything else we can you for you," she asked. Becky wanted to put everything in her car for her that day. She was charged! Merrill was not angry. She was deflated but had nothing but words of praise and thanks for us. As she left, Merrill took one last look at Lady Gray Mountain before getting into her car and driving away.

Required water breaks, a lunch break, and breaking up more wallboard and floor tiles filled our to-do list for the remainder of the day. And Lady Gray Mountain continued to get wider and taller. A sudden thunder storm caused us to pack up a tad early and we made it into the vans just before the downpour for our trip back to the campus. I went to sleep that night with the vision of Merrill's tear-filled eyes in my head and the sound of God speaking through Kyle Marie in my heart.

### Day 6: Clara's House

There was a "new" project for me on our last day in New Orleans. Keith, Diane DuMonde, Abby Marchese, and Grete Bader and I were assigned to do finish work at a house on Briarwood Avenue, a few miles from the campus. It was tedious work – taping in preparation for priming and painting door frames and doors and baseboards. Wood filler had to be applied to the holes and sanded as well. Some doors needed to come down. We worked very hard during our time there but did not finish everything. Diane was very grateful to learn a new skill and Abby and Grete managed to kick over a bucket of paint and "accidentally" get their hand prints on the back of each other's shirts and dot their noses and faces with white paint. We were somewhat satisfied with what we were doing but I longed to be at another site where I felt I could be more useful. I thought to myself... anyone can paint doors and molding. I wanted to be sweating my eyebrows off under a jump suit with three layers of gloves, a respirator, and goggles and boots in 90 degree heat! Was I crazy? Yes. But I also think a small part of all of us was feeling the same way. God had called us there, however, and I had quite a few conversations with him that day. It was a comfort when I learned later Keith had been feeling the same way.

### Days 7 and 8: The Journey Home

Another 24 hours of Felicia's snoring and cute little popping noises. More alphabet games with a twist this time... string it all together with a story at the end... just before you got to the letter "Z"!!! Another night on the floor at St. Anne's in Bristol, VA. Watching Bob DuMonde lying prone and face down on the floor with arms spread the following morning. "Are you praying to Buddha" we asked? "No... I'm trying to get the air out of my air mattress." Yes... Bob was one of the lucky stiffs!

The trip home, however, had a bit of a twist to it. On the way down we were given a devotion to do in our cars... a bible verse and a short reflection, accompanied by the thought for the day and a review question. We were also given a key ring in the outline of a fish with our names on it and a tag with the bible verse on it. As each day progressed, we participated in this devotion at the end of the day and each day added a tag to our key chain. On the trip home, we had two devotions per day to complete, along with the tags that went with them. While on the campus, we split up into small groups and a leader would read the verse and hand out the tags. We were then given the thought of the day and asked to reply to the question. The small group was also asked to share both their "highs" and "lows" of the day. These were marvelous devotions and allowed us to open up to one another. Our words were: LOVE, ACCEPT, FORGIVE, FELLOWSHIP, CONFESS, COMFORT, PRAY, SERVE, BUILDING UP, and DEVOTED. Whoever planned this, knew exactly what they were doing as we needed a reminder of these words and their meanings during that long arduous week. The four devotions we shared on the way home, the answer to the question and telling each other our highs and lows for the week added a different dimension to the trip home. And this was a blessing in itself.

I am humbled to have been a part of King of King's 2007 Mission trip. We truly were on a Mission from God to be His hands and His feet in the storm-torn New Orleans area. Each day as we gathered prior to dinner in the meeting area, you'd overhear conversations about what others had been involved in that day. It's interesting to note that three women in the group, Carol Genalo, Deanna Pavalacka, and Sherry Hunt were our major ceramic tile layers and worked on one house for three straight days. Kyle Marie and Pastor Paul remained at Lady Gray

all four days of the trip and came away with both a sense of accomplishment and a new understanding of just how much there still remains to do. There were many bumps, bruises, blisters, scrapes, cuts, and boo boos during the week. We all came home with badges of honor – or “free souvenirs” as Becky puts it. But no one dwelled on their injuries. What are a few bumps and bruises compared to the broken homes and lives we witnessed down there? Especially on Thursday evening as we all took a tour of St. Bernard’s Parish and the Ninth Ward. Block after block of empty, damaged houses with maybe one rebuilt home sprinkled here and there among the ruins. This reminded me of a saying my mother often used...it looked like a petunia in an onion patch. The house we worked on the last day had a total of 13 FEMA trailers on the short block that people are still living in – almost two years later – as they work to rebuild their homes and lives.

What did I take away from this experience? The reaffirmation that God is truly here among us. He continues to guide us and lead us towards His purpose. He calls us to be His hands and feet - and we are accomplishing this, as the story goes... one starfish at a time. I am proud to have been part of this endeavor. We all are. We’re bringing our stories back to share with you because we couldn’t help but bring a small part of what we experienced in New Orleans back with us.

As a footnote... in speaking to the groups that went back to Charlie’s house on Milan Street – one on Wednesday, and the last on Thursday, I learned that Little Gina was no where to be seen on either day. We’re choosing to believe that the SPCA received my frantic message and came to rescue her. As Courtney reminded us, dogs are God’s creatures, too. We all need to be rescued, and with His love and grace, we will do just that... with... and through... one another.

Peggy Kunkel  
July 30, 2007