

Rebuilding hearts, homes in New Orleans

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On August 29, 2005 one of the deadliest hurricanes hit the United States. Approximately 1836 people lost their lives and millions lost their homes. Over the last two years volunteers have been traveling to New Orleans to help with the clean-up of over \$81.2 billion dollars worth of damage. And while hearts and homes are slowly being repaired, many residents from New Orleans and the surrounding cities are still living in gutted homes or trailers. Help is still needed, and badly. In an effort to attract volunteers, a Forest Lake native has co-founded an organization that provides a place for volunteers to stay and guides them to areas who are in dire need. The right fit In 2005 Greg Loushine graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in Family Social Sciences. After graduation, Loushine accepted a job in a mental and behavioral health company in Eden Prairie. But within one year, Loushine found himself looking for something more. He came across the Peace Corps, but because of health related issues he learned he would not be accepted into the program. However, through the Peace Corps, Loushine found the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps. Based in Charleston, NC, the AmeriCorps is an organization that uses “local, state, and national service programs to connect more than 70,000 Americans each year in intensive service to meet our country’s critical needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment.” According to the AmeriCorps web site, www.ameriCorps.org, the organization “is a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent federal agency created to connect Americans of all ages and backgrounds with opportunities to give back to their communities and their nation.” Loushine signed up for a 10 month service project with the AmeriCorps and soon found himself rebuilding houses in New Orleans. “I couldn’t believe the sign of destruction that still existed after 18 months,” Loushine said. “I saw many homes that were still full of personal objects. Their whole lives were on display.” While in New Orleans, the group Loushine was working with focused on one specific area: St. Bernard Parish. Absolute devastation The 680 square mile parish sits on the far south easterly side of Louisiana and juts out into the Gulf of Mexico. Over 74 percent of the parish is water because of the surrounding islands the parish claims. According to Wikipedia.com almost the entire parish was flooded with anywhere between five and 12 feet of water and “the storm damaged virtually every structure in the parish.” In the 2005 census, before the hurricane hit, St. Bernard Parish’s population was at 65,367 and in 2006 the population was

estimated at 15,514 (according to the US Census Bureau). Loushine said that St. Bernard Parish is a unique part of Louisiana because there are several generations of one family living in blocks of each other. "It is a very family orientated part of town," Loushine said. "It's a very simplified life. It's not about possessions, but family." While in St. Bernard Parish Loushine worked as a foreman for a foundation called the St. Bernard Project. Loushine worked with a specific family of five who had been living in a small FEMA trailer for one year and four months. "They didn't dwell on what had happened," Loushine said. "They looked ahead." Within three weeks Loushine and his crew had the entire family out of their trailer and into a new home. "Seeing the conditions down there I recognized an immediate need for volunteers," Loushine said. "It was an eye opening experience and I realized I have the ability to offer assistance." Live St. Bernard Loushine, along with two fellow AmeriCorps colleagues, starting looking for ways to attract volunteers to the area, specifically St. Bernard Parish. "We needed to find a way to spread volunteerism," Loushine said. The group of three brainstormed and came up with an organization called Live St. Bernard. The focus for Live St. Bernard is to attract volunteers to St. Bernard Parish, and the surrounding areas, give them a nice place to stay and connect them with local volunteer groups where they can serve. According to Loushine Live St. Bernard has created a five-phase service learning process: Preparation, Orientation, Immersion, Reflection and Celebration. The process creates a more holistic experience for volunteers by encouraging them to be aware of the impact their efforts have on the communities as well as themselves. Loushine said the idea is to purchase a gutted home, have volunteers rebuild it and make it large enough to house 16 volunteers at a time. Loushine said that the groups of volunteers would have their own rooms and kitchen space to cook, as well as other living space. He said that one way for the residents and volunteers to connect will be to have the home owners or people the volunteers are helping stop in and even cook for the volunteers. "The main objective is to offer the housing, but provide the resources they need to volunteer," Loushine said. "The volunteers will choose which groups to volunteer with." There are many ways to volunteer in St. Bernard Parish, but Loushine said that everyone gets dirty. "Even the most unskilled worker will get dirty," Loushine said smiling. Between drywall, mudding, priming, painting, installing cupboards, or plumbing, all volunteers will help in whatever way possible. Currently, Live St. Bernard has received its non profit status and they are in the process of fund raising enough money to purchase a gutted home (Live St. Bernard is a program of International Humanities Center, a non profit organization

under Section 501(c) (3) of the IRS code). Loushine hopes to have the home ready and operable by January of 2008. In order for Live St. Bernard to be ready, he is looking for support in a variety of ways. Loushine said that although monetary donations will gladly be accepted, there are many other ways to donate. For instance Loushine said Live St. Bernard is applying for several grants to help out the foundation. He said that if someone was a skilled grant writer that could be one way of donating. As the project kicks off a sort of “wish list” will be placed online. The wish list will mention all of the items that will be needed to run the house; items such as furniture, tools or dishes. If volunteers cannot help right now, Live St. Bernard will be sending out “updates” to those who are interested. The updates will obviously let the volunteer know what is new with Live St. Bernard and where volunteers are needed. Loushine hopes by creating Live St. Bernard “volunteerism” will spread through out the United States and all of New Orleans and the surrounding areas will be rebuilt. “We’re starting at square one,” Loushine said. “Our number one goal is get people back in their homes. Then more and more businesses will return.” For more information about Live St. Bernard visit their web site at www.livestbernard.org.

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