

In April of 2006, just seven months after Katrina hit, I traveled to New Orleans on a Volunteer Mission, with a group from UJC's National Young Leadership Cabinet. Rob Mann and I were national chairs at the time and we felt very strongly that leaders lead and who better than us to take this crucial step. I have lived in Miami nearly my entire life, and I know all too well about the before and afters of Hurricanes, having experienced Andrew and many others since. Rob is an alumnus of Tulane, and he too had a compelling reason to want to help. So we did.

Our group spent two days clearing debris from two homes that had been flooded, one to the ceiling, the other about four feet. There we were with our old clothes, boots, gloves and masks, throwing the memories and the history of two families into a pile of trash for hours on end. Ruined photo albums, books, Hebrew notebooks from years gone by, diplomas, clothing, furniture, nothing to save. I'll never forget the sign that was posted on the house just two doors down from the house we cleared in the Lakeview neighborhood. It said, "In this house a family grew for 40 years". The Jewish community professionals that we spoke with at the time, their hearts heavy, didn't know if their community would recover. Who would return? What would they be returning to? Would a doctor who is currently living in Houston return to rebuild a practice in New Orleans when he didn't know how many of his patients would do the same? So many questions.....

I had heard all kinds of statements of the progress or lack thereof in New Orleans. I wondered if the city could ever return to its past glory and if so, would the levees be able to hold if another Category 4 or 5 storm came knocking. And if G-d forbid there was another Katrina type storm, would the Federal authorities be more prepared? Based on our experiences with Wilma in Miami just a year later, I wasn't so confident and for all these reasons, I like so many others, had mixed feelings about whether or not the Government should invest the millions or billions needed to rebuild New Orleans.

The answers to so many questions became apparent when UJC's National Women's Philanthropy held our Board meetings in New Orleans last month. The New Orleans we saw is a city of hope and of potential. The Jewish community is vibrant, confident and strong, and I'd like to think that the community at large is as well. There are still deep wounds, and scars of the tragedy of August 2005, but there is also tremendous signs of healing, rebirth, and rededication, which are themes that we as Jews, know well.

I am so glad that I returned. Learning how we, as part of the national system, helped revive the Jewish community of New Orleans (and to some degree the community at large) was inspiring beyond words, and I'm now even more committed to inspiring others to become involved in their Federations. Our history has taught us, time and time again that it is not IF there will be another G-d forbid, but WHEN and we must do all that we can to be prepared for it. Especially after this visit, I am confident that we will.

Bobbie Higer