

Louisiana Meets Pennsylvania

Community outreach catches on. by Diane J. McDougall

Some things are contagious. Not just chicken pox, yawns and giggles, but also the “rush” of knowing that you’ve stepped into the stream of something God is doing. Ask Jane Delsordo what that feels like and where she “caught” it, and she’ll say that it makes her want to stand up and yell. And that she caught it in Louisiana.

Since 2005, some 9,000 volunteers have hopped on caravans, flown in by airplane or bussed themselves across country to Louisiana—all to volunteer for anywhere from a few days to a few months with the EFCA’s Crisis Response Ministry.

Stories that are both heartbreaking *and* heartwarming have arisen from the streets and alleyways of New Orleans and other Katrina-

yelling, “Yes, yes, yes—I get what you’re saying!”

Jane stayed in her seat, barely. But after the service, she immediately met with the elders, who started praying about how God might want them to be more involved in their community.

The question indeed was “more involved,” because Community EFC had already stepped up to meet a clear need in their neighborhood. The church sits directly across the street from Lawnton Elementary School. In 2004, church members had brainstormed the idea of launching a tutoring program for some of the students.

“We knew that God put us in this neighborhood to reach out in tangible ways to the school,” says Carolyn Aiken, who coordinates the tutoring program. “The school administration was very pleased that we wanted to come alongside them to help the kids who might ‘fall through the cracks’; so with their approval, the tutoring began.”

Two afternoons a week, 11 volunteers from the church tutor children in kindergarten through second grade. Carolyn always had a dream, though, to take their involvement further—help the tutoring families even more. So when the Katrina team returned from Louisiana with a contagious vision, and Jane talked with the elders, something special began to happen.

Jane’s vision turned into a broader community-outreach group called “Partnering With a Purpose.” A core team of eight people began praying and asking about needs in the community—wanting to replicate what they had seen be so powerful in Louisiana.

Their goal was never to do everything themselves but to serve as a catalyst and communication center: A need arises, then PWAP evaluates it and shoots out an e-mail to church members asking for volunteers.

In PWAP, Carolyn saw the perfect opportunity to help make *her* dream come true: *Why not have PWAP coordinate a free, home-cooked meal for the parents and their children, at the end of a tutoring session?*

“They are usually very rushed when they come to pick up their kids,” Carolyn says, “and this would help them relax a little and not have to worry about making supper when they get home. It would also allow us to build relationships with them as we talk and eat with them.”

The PWAP team loved the idea; the parents



COURTESY COMMUNITY EFC (2)

Home-cooked meals and tutoring combine to build relationships between Community EFC of Harrisburg, Pa., and its neighbor: Lawnton Elementary School.

stricken regions. And the amazing thing is: More heartwarming stories are popping up all across the country as volunteers go home with the contagious desire to rally church members to meet pressing needs in their communities.

On the 1,200-mile drive home from their April 2006 volunteer experience, Jane’s car-full of church members couldn’t stop talking about the week. “I just knew that God was saying, *This has to happen in your church,*” Jane says.

The next day, during the service at Jane’s home church, Community EFC of Harrisburg, Pa., one of the elders preached straight to Jane’s heart, with his message about servant evangelism. “It was very hard for me to contain myself,” Jane says. “I could have just stood up and started

were surprised and grateful; and volunteers came out of the woodwork to supply the food and visit with the families. So the tutoring meals were officially launched twice a month.

"Relationships are also being formed as we know each other's faces and names now," Carolyn adds. "The very first time we offered a meal, a single mother came with her daughter and said, 'I think God is trying to tell me something. What times are your church services?'"

"She came the very next Sunday and has come three weeks in a row. She comes to church, hugs the people she has met from PWAP and goes into the worship service. We get excited seeing this response, as this is what PWAP is all about."

Jane's vision was even broader than tutoring, so she and the PWAP team began arranging meetings with Lawnton Elementary school officials and teachers and the PTA—always asking, "What can we do for you? How can we partner with you? What other families in this community need help that we can offer?"

As a result, the PTA president mentioned a need to do some cleaning of the property behind the school, so PWAP sent out word to the church, and more church members showed up than did parents or teachers.

Lawnton's principal also pointed PWAP toward one particular family with financial needs—who happened to already be a tutoring family. At Thanksgiving, PWAP organized meals for this family and several others in the church and community with needs.

Then, in February, PWAP members received the stunning news that the mother of this tutoring family had died suddenly, at age 38, leaving behind a husband and four young children. School officials contacted PWAP to ask if they would provide food at the memorial service, and the church responded generously.

Now, PWAP is coordinating care for the family through another church the family had attended. Which greatly encourages Jane and her team: "My long-range vision is to have little PWAPs all over the place in our church, and in a lot of other churches, because there are a whole lot of hurting people. I thought, *PWAP is not six months old, and we are already partnering with another church. God, You are good.*"

PWAP is also dreaming of other ways to reach into the community, including offering reading help for children over the summer and starting a free car clinic for single mothers. "I expect an explosion of good to come from our church," Carolyn says. "The community already is feeling our presence. Only God knows what is going to come to pass through this as we follow *His* leading."

Community EFC is moving forward with its vision for loving its community—a contagious vision that was set aflame in Louisiana and continues to burn brightly through new, creative avenues. ■

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