

Volunteering: 'Worth Every Drop of Sweat'

BY KATHY GURCHIEK

Sixteen-year-old Doyle Cooper lifted his trumpet to his lips in the front yard along St. Roch Street, breaking the muggy Saturday morning air with strains of "When the Saints Go Marching In" and "I'll Fly Away" as he serenaded sweat-stained, dirt-smudged workers laying sod and planting flowers and trees.

Cooper, who lives nearby, was headed to a student jazz workshop when he and his mother stopped to check out the activity. On impulse, the rising high school junior broke into an impromptu performance, his mother adding a little tambourine accompaniment as she held a black umbrella against the sun.

It was a dose of lagniappe (pronounced lang-yap)—a lil' somethin' somethin'—for the participants in SHRM's "voluntourism" project at Gentilly Terrace, a 100-year-old neighborhood northwest of the French Quarter.

SHRM partnered with the local nonprofit Beacon of Hope for a volunteer project Saturday and Sunday that focused heavily on landscaping. The event is an effort by SHRM Annual Conference attendees to give back to the community.

Volunteers paid \$75 to work in the heat—\$50 was used for purchasing plants, mulch, soil and other landscape materials; \$25 went to Beacon of Hope administration, according to Beth Grossman, manager of meetings and conferences for SHRM.

In addition, SHRM employees donated cans of bug spray, boxes of bug towelettes, 27 bottles of hand sanitizer and 14 first-aid kits, as well as \$450 in Visa, Lowe's and Home Depot gift cards to Beacon of Hope to help fund the plantings and other items.

After a guided tour, volunteers arrived at their headquarters for the day—a tent in a vacant lot—where Beacon of Hope workers greeted them and explained the effect Katrina had on the quiet six-block stretch that is nicknamed "Little California" for its California Craftsman-style bungalows dating from 1910 to 1926.

"Two things volunteers bring us—hope and energy," Beacon of Hope outreach coordinator Connie Uddo told volunteers Saturday before they headed out with rakes, shovels, safety vests and gloves.

"It's so humbling that it's four years down the road" since Hurricane Katrina hit, "and y'all have shown up," she added.

Parts of the middle-class neighborhood were damaged when the London Avenue Canal levees on the east and the Industrial Canal levee on the west were breached following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. It was the first time in 96 years that flooding hit the neighborhood, which is dotted with English cottages and Spanish and Mediterranean Revival homes from the 1900s and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Saltwater destroyed the St. Augustine grass—one of two kinds of grass that can grow in this climate—that filled the street's median, or "neutral ground," and damaged other plants and trees.

Volunteers helped replace the canopy of trees that had once graced the neutral grounds where residents stroll, walk their dogs and push baby strollers. Monique Pilie, founder of Hike for KATREENa, led some volunteers in re-establishing that canopy.

A Tree Grows in Gentilly

After Katrina, the New Orleans native vowed to hike the entire 2,174 miles of the Appalachian Trail and plant a tree for every mile hiked. She

met and exceeded that goal. Saturday, she led the planting of the 4,900th tree in New Orleans. It was among the oleanders, live oaks, sweet bay magnolias, southern magnolias, cypress and fringe trees, also known as granny greybeards, planted during the two-day project.

"I've been wanting to volunteer in New Orleans since Katrina, and this was the first real opportunity I had and I didn't want to pass it up," said Art Koonce of Atlanta, HR director for retail clothing store CitiTrends and a SHRM member for about 15 years.

Stephanie Rich of Cooperstown, N.Y., a senior at Utica College where she belongs to a SHRM student chapter, laid sod and trundled a wheelbarrow filled with load after load of rich dark soil at the home of Martinez McConduit at 5155 St. Roch St.

Rich is one of seven members of her student chapter attending the 61st Annual Conference,

and she was enthusiastic about the chance to volunteer.

"I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to help any way that I could," said Rich, whose other volunteer work has included serving as a counselor at a camp for children who have lost a parent or close relative to cancer.

"It's great so many people are here early to reach out and help, even on a hot day like this," she said. "It made us like the organization even better," she said of SHRM.

Like Rich, SHRM member Cheryl Y. Wesley, director of HR at St. John's Community Services in Washington, D.C., was happy to volunteer her time. Wesley has performed volunteer work in the metropolitan D.C. area and elsewhere, including working at a New Orleans mission.

"I love this city," said Rich, for whom arriving at the conference a day early to work in the heat was a no-brainer.

"Gotta sign up. Gotta give [back]," said Wesley. She liked, she added, seeing residents still hopeful and resilient, "keeping on, keeping on."

Also donating their time were people from CareerBuilder, one of the conference exhibitors and a co-sponsor of the voluntourism project; SHRM's immediate past Board Chair, Janet N. Parker, SPHR; Board Director-at-Large Jose A. Berrios; Board Director-at-Large Bette J. Francis, SPHR; and Suzanne M. Mellard, wife of SHRM President and CEO Laurence G. O'Neil. About 70 people participated Sunday.

Residents thanked volunteers profusely.

McConduit's gratitude bubbled on the kitchen stove among pots of shrimp, crab, sausage gumbo, red beans and rice, fried chicken and salad. She wanted to do something for the volunteers who had labored to make her wish, to have the prettiest garden on St. Roch, come true.

For Koonce, who planted several trees on Saturday, the day was "worth every drop of sweat."

"I may come back years from now," he mused, "and come down this block and see how those trees have grown."



Conference attendees helped landscape and renovate the Katrina-damaged Gentilly area of New Orleans on Saturday. Page 46.

