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Rutgers Students Give Back in Their Backyards

Sandy's devastation leaves lasting impression on volunteers working to 'Serve the Shore'

April 17, 2013

By Melissa Kvidahl

Give where you live.

That's the Rutgers [Student Volunteer Council](#)'s motto – one that's been magnified by Hurricane Sandy's destruction.

In response to the storm that hit close to home, the council, which connects students with volunteer opportunities throughout the school year, organized several volunteer aid efforts. In March, 50 Rutgers students assisted with demolition and clean up in Keansburg, a community perched on the Raritan Bay, during a "Serve the Shore" service trip.

"We hear that Seaside plans to be back up and running in May, but there are so many areas that aren't seeing any help," said Stephanie Bucu, a senior psychology and linguistics double major in the School of Arts and Sciences and co-director of the Student Volunteer Council. "We worked on houses that had 4 feet of water in them during the storm. Houses still had piles of debris and trash on the curbs. People have been displaced from their homes for months and are just helpless right now."

After witnessing the lingering devastation there five months after Sandy, the council planned another service trip. On April 13, they were 200 strong when they turned their attention to Island Beach State Park for a beach cleanup. Student volunteers sifted through marshes, sand dunes and the shoreline, picking up items that washed up during and after Sandy. Among the items recovered, include pieces of boardwalk, tires, windows and chunks ripped from homes.

During their service day in March, students gutted two homes down to the studs in six hours. They tore out kitchen appliances, floor tiles, cabinets, insulation – whatever stood between them and the open wall.

"We just went at it with sledgehammers and crowbars. We took everything out so they could start over," Bucu said.

The students initially chose Keansburg because they felt the community had been overlooked by many relief efforts, said Karen Ardizzone, the group's staff advisor. Still, they weren't prepared for what they saw when they arrived.

"I had been to New Orleans in 2007, and as soon as we got (to Keansburg), I was brought back to Hurricane Katrina," said Ardizzone. "There were signs on lawns saying 'FEMA, where are you?' It was hard to believe that this was happening to people 30 minutes away from where we live."

Trucks navigated the streets, handing out hot meals to those still without heat and electricity.

"What was particularly difficult was seeing a sign saying 'We need food,' " said Yamila Nicasio, a junior exercise science and sports studies major, who joined the relief effort. "When a natural disaster first hits, people are very motivated to help, but when the media coverage fades, the need for volunteers will still be there. Now is the time to help."

The need at the shore is still so great that the [Alternative Breaks program](#), which typically flies students out of state for volunteer opportunities during spring or winter recess, changed its spring break plans this year to help towns along the Jersey Shore.

"We've done day trips around New Jersey in the past, but once the storm hit, we were desperate to help and put our efforts to use for a full week during the spring Alternative Break, rather than during smaller day trips," said Bucu.

Bringing the volunteer experience home spawned a new mentality for many students. After spending a previous alternative break volunteering in West Virginia, Bucu returned feeling gratified but disconnected. But with Sandy, it's personal. Her roommates' families sustained damage to their Brick homes and a family friend's home was entirely destroyed.

"I used to see these tragedies as something that happened to someone else. I think a lot of students have that experience. We were traveling to unfamiliar communities and we didn't know them any other way because we don't live there," Bucu said. "In New Jersey, we've seen the bustling boardwalks and beach towns and know what they used to be, and what they are now, and what they could be again."

Students can join the Student Volunteer Council listserv by visiting communityservice.rutgers.edu. Individuals interested in donating money can send a check payable to Rutgers University to: Sandy Relief Fund, 613 George St., New Brunswick, NJ 08901.



Credit: Cameron Bowman

Rutgers students pull a tire from the sand at Island Beach State Park in Seaside during an April 13 "Serve the Shore" beach cleanup organized by the university's Student Volunteer Council.

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