



Helping the Gulf Coast, One Semester at a Time

IN AUGUST 2005, THE 175-MPH winds of Hurricane Katrina blew across the Gulf Coast, swept inland, and reduced 275,000 homes and countless lives to shambles.

Immediately after, Robert Nydick, PhD, professor of management and operations at the Villanova School of Business, had an idea: Take students to the affected region to see how the University can help. “At that point there were no planes going into New Orleans,” he says. “So I told my class, ‘I don’t know how we’re getting there, and I don’t know where we’re staying, but let’s commit to doing this.’”

Fourteen students volunteered to join him—at no expense to the University or to any charity. They each agreed to pay their own way.

Three weeks later, the group flew to Gulfport, MS. There they met with one of the heads of Habitat for Humanity and

leaders of other organizations helping to plan the rebuilding efforts, then moved on to New Orleans. They surveyed the damage, assessed the needs, and determined how to help. Then they flew home to make their report. The next semester, Nydick led a group of two dozen student volunteers to Slidell, LA, to help build homes.

They went again the next semester. And the next. And the next. And they are still going, every semester, heading south to help communities rebuild. This past March marked their 12th trip, and Nydick plans to keep taking students to the region for as many semesters as they are willing to go.

The dedication to helping just one affected area is important, Nydick says. It helps teach that people remain in need even when their plight has fallen out of the news cycle. Moreover, the consistency has allowed Villanova

University to develop a relationship with a New Orleans community.

Though the first few trips were to various locations, they now focus on one town: Picayune, MS. “I don’t know if they’ve adopted us or we’ve adopted them,” Nydick says. “When we first went there, they had built two houses in 10 years. In the eight trips we’ve made since, the community has added nine houses in four years. We really feel like we’ve made a connection and made a difference in this town.”

That is an understatement. The VSB contingent has made such an impression that the *Picayune Item* has published at least five articles on the students, and during the last trip the local television news station covered their visit as the lead story.

Vincent Solano VSB ’11, a double major in Economics and International Business, has joined the team on seven



Robert Nydick, PhD, and Daniel Wright, PhD, (right of group shot) join students in Picayune, MS. Nydick has taken students to the Gulf Coast every semester for the last six years to build homes.

trips during his time at the University. The only semester he missed was when he was studying abroad in Ireland. “The whole experience has been extremely rewarding,” he says. “What started as an empty street my freshman year is now a small neighborhood. Each time I go back, it’s great to see the families who are living in homes that Villanova students had a huge part in building.”

The students often interact with the people they have helped, which is part of the experience. “I think what has kept me going back is the appreciation of the people in the community,” Solano says. “The way it breaks down for a lot of us who go on the trips is that we recognize that by sacrificing one weekend we can help change an entire family’s lives for the better.”

That change has spread through the community. The broad impact of the students’ work is apparent each time Nydick returns to Picayune. “On one trip I went to get coffee at a local shop, and when we walked in everyone there knew all about us,” he says. “Then the next day they showed up and volunteered to help. It’s a special experience to see our students work beside the people who are going to be moving into the house that we’re working on, or with previous homeowners who come to volunteer.”

Daniel Wright, PhD, VSB associate

professor of operations and supply chain management and chair of the Department of Management and Operations, has helped Nydick on 11 of the trips. James M. Emig, PhD, professor of accountancy, has helped on four. Both agree that the success and longevity of the project are, in a large part, due to the dedication of Villanova students. Each semester more students volunteer than the semester before. More than 300 students now have made the trip. Some still go even after graduating: one recent alumnus flew in from Chicago, two more from New York City. The most recent trip, in March, included a record 56 students and alumni.

The last two projects entailed the students accomplishing what is called a Blitz Build. “We show up to find only a foundation,” Nydick says. “When we leave, there’s a whole house there, and we hand over the keys to the new homeowner. The first we did in 44 hours, the second in 40 hours.”

Wright is not surprised by that feat. “The students’ energy and commitment is a force to be reckoned with—they just won’t stop working,” he says. “During the 40 hours, one student slept for only five hours. He was absolutely on task the whole time. The hardest

part of my job and Professor Nydick’s job is trying to get people to actually leave the site and go get rest.”

Still, the students do more than build houses. They also receive an educational benefit. After all, there is a business element to this project. Between trips students work on a volunteer basis to raise funds (almost \$50,000 to date), and Nydick ties all this into his Business Decision Making course. “I teach my students a methodology of how people and organizations make decisions, and how they apply them by talking, doing research, and communicating,” Nydick says. “Many organizations that are helping to rebuild after Katrina still need help. So the students use this methodology to decide where to donate the money they raise.”

Connecting theory to practice and giving back to the community are two important tenets of Villanova’s mission, and they shine here in a single, monumental effort.

“I strongly feel that these trips symbolize what a VSB student should strive to be,” Solano says. “While being a good student is important, if you want to have a future in business, then being a good citizen is important as well. Now, more than ever, we need business leaders who are looking out for others.”

— by Chris Nicholson