

# PROJECT NEW ORLEANS



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Though the national discussion of Hurricane Katrina abates with the passage of time, the hurricane's devastating effects on New Orleans, LA, continue to this day, with schools, hospitals, medical clinics, and other critical infrastructure still struggling to recover. The 2007 Clinical Congress provided an opportunity for many in attendance to participate in efforts to help restore these much-needed services.

### **Volunteers at work**

The American College of Surgeons' Project New Orleans encompassed several ways for individuals to contribute to the city's recovery. On Tuesday, October 8, and Wednesday, October 9, 180 volunteers—surgeons, family members, residents, industry executives, exhibitors, and others—donned head-to-toe protective gear, from hard hats and hairnets to hazmat jumpsuits and shoe booties, to begin demolition on a former school building that was approved as the site of a new medical clinic for economically disadvantaged and uninsured residents of the Ninth Ward. The Daughters of Charity Health Clinic at St. Cecilia's has been designated as a national Center of Excellence, meaning that it will be built as a model for ideal provision of integrated health care in conjunction with local community and academic centers.

After a blessing by representatives of St. Cecilia's and an introduction and safety briefing by representatives of Habitat for Humanity, everyone went right to work. Participants were assembled into groups by the color of bandanas distributed as they entered the worksite. Despite the extreme humidity in New Orleans' semitropical climate, contributors approached the work with enthusiasm, swinging sledgehammers, climbing ladders, wielding spades, and maneuvering crowbars to remove walls, ceilings, floors, an entire kitchen facility, blackboards, and furniture before pushing wheelbarrows full of debris to the dumpsters lined up outside. Organizers repeatedly told the volunteers that they were way too efficient and way ahead of schedule; New Orleans dumpster suppliers had a difficult time keeping up with the pace, as seven dumpsters were filled over the course of the two-day project.

Opposite: Project New Orleans volunteers gathered in front of St. Cecilia's (photo by Kenny Bordelon, Lagniappe Studio Inc.).



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Dr. Kelly (foreground) helps take down a wall inside St. Cecilia's.

In the end, volunteers completed demolition of 24,000 square feet of the building's interior, far exceeding the expectations of the site's overseers. The contractors who will later build the new clinic estimated the value of this donated work at more than \$60,000.

In addition to hands-on opportunities to help, donations were accepted in support of ongoing efforts by the two agencies that were central to this project: New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity and Daughters of Charity of New Orleans—St. Cecilia Health Clinic. More than \$22,000 had been raised as of November 2007, including substantial donations by the University of Cincinnati Medical Center, KCI, the American Association of Surgical Physicians Assistants in conjunction with Montefiore Medical Center Surgical Residency Program, and multiple individual donors.



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KATHLEEN CASEY

Volunteers at St. Cecelia's. Top left photo, left to right: Cathryn Clary, MD, vice-president of U.S. external medical affairs for Pfizer, Inc.; Thomas R. Russell, MD, FACS, ACS Executive Director; and Sylvia D. Campbell, MD, FACS. Bottom right photo, from "Team Cincinnati," front row: Sue Weinstein-Nussbaum, MD, MBA; an unidentified participant; Thomas Shin, MD (PGY-4); and Karen Huevo, MD (PGY-4). Back row: Jocelyn Logan-Collins, MD (PGY-4); Sha Ron Jackson, MD (PGY-3), Timothy Pritts, MD, PhD, assistant professor and associate program director; and an unidentified Habitat for Humanity worker.

Another aspect of Project New Orleans was a school supply drive that was suggested and organized by Mike Trotter, MD, FACS, of Houma, LA. This effort was kicked off by the staff at the ACS who collected boxes of supplies over a week-long drive. Once at Congress, exhibitors were invited to donate materials from their displays. By the end of the meeting, dozens of exhibitors had contributed enough notepads, pens, pencils, markers, water

bottles, office supplies, notebooks, binders, and tote bags to fill 13 pallets. This donation was so large that it required an 18-wheel truck to transport the supplies to a warehouse for sorting and preparing for delivery to the schools in need in November. Dr. Trotter has undertaken similar efforts at several other medical conventions that have been held in New Orleans this year. The ACS school supply drive was the most successful to date.

## Project New Orleans press

Surgeons were all over the local news the week of Clinical Congress, as it was the first conference convened in New Orleans in several months. But Project New Orleans itself garnered much media coverage, including an Associated Press story published in three newspapers. Following is a list of media outlets that reported on Project New Orleans.

### Print media

- Rick Jervis, *USA Today*: Tourists return to New Orleans as city mends. October 12, 2007. Available at: [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-10-11-tourism\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-10-11-tourism_N.htm).
- Janet McCounnaughey, Associated Press: Surgeons in hard hats and hazmat suits help turn school to clinic. October 9, 2007. Available at: <http://www.wvltv.com/local/stories/wvl100907jbsurgeons.15466f70b.html> (Published in the October 9 editions of *Biloxi Sun Herald*, *The Times-Picayune*, and *The Natchez Democrat*).

### Broadcast media (all aired October 9)

- WGNO (ABC affiliate), New Orleans: ACS to build medical clinic—interview with Ann Mancino, MD, FACS.
- WVUE-TV (Fox affiliate), New Orleans, and WWL4 (CBS affiliate), New Orleans: ACS to build medical clinic—interview with Kathleen Casey, MD, FACS, Director of Operation Giving Back.
- Coverage based on the AP news story by Ms. McCounnaughey:
  - WDSU (NBC affiliate), Louisiana: Surgeons help turn Bywater school into clinic.
  - KATC, Louisiana: Surgeons in hard hats and hazmat suits help turn school into clinic.

## Voice of the volunteers

For many of the volunteers, the impetus to participate in Project New Orleans came from that feeling of needing to do *something* and they were all proud to be a part of this mission. Tricia A. Kelly, MD, FACS, a breast surgeon at George Washington University in Washington, DC, said that after hearing so much about Katrina on the news, she felt obligated to do her part to help. This sentiment was echoed by Thomas Shin, MD, a member of the University of Cincinnati contingent of residents, program director, and the chief resident's wife, who

If you would like to support the ongoing work of the St. Cecilia Medical Clinic (slated to open in March 2008) or Habitat for Humanity, information on the project and ways to donate needed equipment or cash are available online at this dedicated and secure site: <http://www.acsprojectnola.org/>.

decided as a group to participate (see photo, page 34). “This is my first time working with Habitat for Humanity,” Dr. Shin said, “and I just want to contribute whatever I can to help.” Jose Serrano, a third-year medical student at Ponce School of Medicine in Puerto Rico and a first-time Congress attendee, felt the same way: “In Puerto Rico and Pennsylvania [where he is from], I would hear about Katrina all the time, and I got tired of hearing about it on television without being able to touch it. I wanted to see it firsthand and see what I could do to help.”

Dennis Witmer, MD, FACS, chief of surgery at the Veterans Administration in Wilmington, DE, appreciated the opportunity to give back and improve the environment for the people of New Orleans. “Everyone in their hearts wants to help but doesn't know how,” Dr. Witmer said. “Project New Orleans provides us the mechanism to do something concrete.”

At the conclusion of the first leg of the project on Tuesday morning, Tara Bruslun, MD, FACS, of Ann Arbor, MI, commended Project New Orleans: “I wish there was something similar at all College meetings,” she said, adding, “Certainly there is a need no matter where we go.” □

## Thank you

We are grateful to all who have generously contributed to making these events so meaningful for all involved. The College's partnerships with the New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity and the New Orleans Daughters of Charity were essential to the success of this effort. We would also like to express deep gratitude to the local and national leadership of Ascension Health and the staff of Freeman (the general contractor for Clinical Congress). In-kind donations of building supplies, transportation, food, and beverages were graciously provided by Ethicon Inc. and Womack Construction. Lastly, Telusys Inc. created the Project New Orleans Web site pro bono.