



After The Storm Comes A **Ra**

By Jack Penchoff

The Southern Governors' Association 72nd Annual Meeting in New Orleans began with work at a Habitat for Humanity site and a two-hour tour of the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina. The SGA also coordinated efforts to raise \$1.5 million to help rebuild New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas.

A late morning deluge soaked New Orleans as bus loads of volunteers arrived at Musicians' Village, a Habitat for Humanity housing community in the city's Upper Ninth Ward.

Organized by the Southern Governors' Association, about 130 eager workers were huddled under a large tent as the rain turned the construction site into a muddy field.

However, just as suddenly as the rain clouds rolled in they departed, leaving behind a blue sky, lots of sun and steamy air.

For Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, SGA chair, rain had once again shaped her activities with SGA. One year earlier her luggage was packed and she was ready to depart for SGA's 2005 annual meeting in Georgia when she was notified that Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on the Gulf Coast with New Orleans in her path.

The governor cancelled the trip to the SGA meeting, where she was scheduled to be installed as SGA chair, and remained in Louisiana to deal with the devastation left by Katrina.

A Rainbow

Even though Blanco did not make it to her installation as SGA's presiding officer, she has used her leadership role to help SGA coordinate a fundraising effort to support construction of Habitat for Humanity homes.

The effort was held in conjunction with SGA's 72nd Annual Meeting in New Orleans July 15-17. SGA also organized a 130-member volunteer corps from the staffs of SGA members, corporate sponsors and intergovernmental agencies.



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Southern governors support New Orleans' rebirth

"After the storm comes a rainbow," Blanco said before the volunteers began their work. "This is a tremendous rainbow of perseverance and progress—rebirth and renewal."

During the past year, SGA worked with corporate underwriters to raise nearly \$1.5 million. That money will cover all the costs associated with the construction of 20 houses, including land acquisition and credit counseling for prospective homeowners, as well as the actual home construction.

Some of the most generous contributions came from 84 Lumber, Entergy, LP Building Products, American Electric Power (AEP), Chevron, Freddie Mac, ExxonMobil, Shell Oil Company and Symantec.

"Organizations like Habitat for Humanity and the businesses you see before you today have built the rainbow of progress for our communities," Blanco said.

Hammerin' Governors

Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine was probably the most experienced volunteer on the site. While in law school, he took a year off to work as a Christian missionary, serving as principal of a vocational and technical school in a small village in Honduras.

Kaine hammered nails, brushed on paint and carried his own ladder during the afternoon. He compared the work to the Bible story in which Jesus fed thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread and fish.

"This is called the 'loaves and fish' story," Kaine said. "Put a little bit in the basket and see it multiplied."

Kaine's wife, Anne Holton, was also one of the volunteer workers.

Accompanying Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee to the site was his wife Janet, a member of the Habitat board.

The first lady of Arkansas came dressed to work, hammering siding into place.

Huckabee, who admitted his wife's carpentry work was superior to his, did earn applause from Mrs. Huckabee when he flawlessly knocked a nail into a wood stud with five hearty swings.

Musicians' Village was conceived by New Orleans' musicians Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis, who view the village as a way to help displaced musicians remain in the Crescent City. Project plans call for the construction of 75 homes. The centerpiece will be the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music.

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—Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco

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Anyone who falls within the income guidelines for a Habitat house can apply for a home in the village, but special outreach will go to musicians. Connick and Marsalis hope their fundraising efforts will also help build an additional 225 homes in the Upper Ninth Ward.

Concerts Help Project

Seed money for Musicians' Village came from proceeds of two benefit concerts last fall in New York City.

In April, the Dave Matthews Band pledged a matching grant to Habitat of up to \$1.5 million.

Musicians Village is being built on a former vacant lot that was the site of a school building torn down 15 years ago.

Following the work at Musicians' Village, Blanco and Hunt Downer, assistant adjutant general of the Louisiana National Guard and former Louisiana speaker of the house, took the governors, their staffs and other guests on a two-hour tour of some of the most devastated neighborhoods in New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish.

—Jack Penchoff is CSG assistant director of communications and senior editor of State News.



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