



# Still rebuilding in New Orleans

BY VANESSA RENDERMAN

[vrenderman@nwitimes.com](mailto:vrenderman@nwitimes.com)

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ST. JOHN | Two and a half years after Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast, a group of local volunteers wants the survivors to know they're not forgotten.

"We made a promise, and we're going to keep it," said Helen Rutkowski, co-coordinator of the Faith Without Borders mission ministry at St. John the Evangelist Church in St. John.

A group of 35 volunteers from 15 churches in Northwest Indiana will leave March 24 for a five-day trip to New Orleans, the seventh trip for the group since September 2006. They will work on rebuilding four New Orleans homes, Rutkowski said.

The volunteer list surged to more than 50 when students, particularly from Andean High School, signed up in honor of Julie Herr, who died in January. She was the assistant principal at the Merrillville-based high school and a former teacher at St. John the Evangelist School.

Herr was a core team member with the missions, Rutkowski said.

Many of those volunteers were put on a waiting list because there isn't housing to accommodate them all.

Keith Burke, a carpenter from Crown Point, will be among the volunteers traveling to New Orleans.

"It's an opportunity that I have -- to give to some people that have had some tough struggles, let them know they're still not forgotten," he said.

Burke has gone on three other missions but never before to New Orleans. He is motivated by the desire to help people move forward with their lives.

"The bad part is over with," he said. "Now, move on to the good."

Rutkowski said she saw minimal improvements between her August 2006 and August 2007 visit to New Orleans.

"I stand, shaking my head and saying, 'This can't be America,' because we have left and abandoned our own countrymen," she said.

Knowing that people are still struggling to live is what motivates Rutkowski to return to New Orleans.

The volunteers will bring medical supplies, gift cards from home improvement stores and 6,700 pounds of donated food that will stock a mobile food pantry in New Orleans' 9th Ward, Rutkowski said.

Faith Without Borders volunteer Jocelyn Gallegos, from Hammond Seventh Day Adventist Church, nominated the group for a \$5,000 volunteerism grant from Mail Boxes Etc., which the group was awarded.

About 75 percent of the grant covers the rental fee of three vans and fuel. The balance will go toward buying building materials to rebuild the homes, Rutkowski said.

Faith Without Borders is open to people of all faiths and communities.

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