Helping the world’s poor

Rob Gardner, assistant professor of sociology who is studying grassroots responses to disasters, has traveled to Louisiana three times since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the Gulf Coast in 2005.

In 2005, millions of people watched from afar as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita turned the world upside down for Gulf Coast residents. Rob Gardner, Linfield College assistant professor of sociology, watched as well, with the eye of a social scientist. Then he traveled to Arabi, La., in January 2006 – the first of three trips – to study grassroots community involvement following natural disasters.

“People were going without food, shelter, transportation and clothing,” he said. “The smaller relief organizations were able to respond in a more agile way than traditional models.”

Since that first trip, Gardner has returned to Louisiana twice. In March 2006, he worked with Linfield students to “muck and gut” - decaying homes. And this year, he and Ed Gans, assistant professor of mass communication, co-led a January Term class there to study community change and the role of mass media during the storms.

Thanks to a Linfield collaborative research grant, Gardner and sociology major Kate Lee ’08 spent the summer surveying volunteers online to learn about their motivations and experiences. They found the majority of volunteers traveled more than 1,000 miles and most came from large cities. Many were retirees, students or people in a transitional phase.

“People realized they could make a difference,” said Lee. “You can’t do great things without making sacrifices.”

An epiphany that will stick with her for the rest of her life, Lee said. “It was an interesting subsection of the population,” said Gardner, who will present initial findings at the American Sociological Association conference in New York City in August. He has also received a grant from the Natural Hazards Research Center at the University of Colorado, funded by the National Science Foundation, which will allow him immediate access to investigate the grassroots response in the event of a future disaster.

For Lee, who took part in both the Linfield alternative spring break and the January Term class, the trips have been life changing. She came away with a love for the area and its people, but more than that, the experience has focused her goals. She is interested in housing issues and hopes to bolster her experiences with an internship next year.

Ironically, the most difficult part of the trips for Lee was returning home. “Seeing everything how it should be and remembering our work made me wish I could go back and help more,” she said.

Digging into disaster relief

“We delivered babies, treated typhoid, and gave away over-the-counter medicines they carried to Cameron in their luggage. In many cases, they used their own money to help those who were the sickest,” said Joe Romero ’07.

They also observed or helped with emergency surgeries, set a broken arm and gave away over-the-counter medicines they carried to Cameron in their luggage. In many cases, they used their own money to help those who were the sickest.

Jake Crevistan ’08 lets a Cameroon boy listen to his heartbeat during a health screening. Linfield students conducted health screenings, delivered babies, and treated typhoid and many other diseases for 21 days in a very small, very close-knit community. It was founded in 1999 by Ruth (Musunu) Timi Manyaka ’69, who invited the Linfield students to help with the program. (See related story on page 26.)

Six months after she returned, Michelle Gibson ’08, is still haunted by the face of one severely deformed child, desperate for medical attention. She continues searching for an organization willing to help. When an HIV-positive woman shared with Gibson, the mother of three children, her desire to have another child, Gibson realized she could not apply her Western values in meeting the needs of her patient.

“There was utter devastation,” he said. “Large items had been picked up and dropped randomly across the landscape. You could drive for three hours and still pass homes that were flooded and completely destroyed by the floodwaters and the levy breaches. It was surreal.”

The students came face-to-face with a culture that was very different from their own, said David Groff, one of the course professors and director of the Portland Campus.

“They were faced with how differently some people live and the kinds of chances that they have,” he said. “They related really well to the children and they showed a high degree of professionalism and care for the children and their patients.”

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