



HOW TO LEND A HELPING HAND:

Behind-the-Scenes with Oakland County's Volunteer Project in Storm-torn Hattiesburg

-By Andrea L. Dono



Photo: Kristin Wiltfang
MSOC Hattiesburg Assistance Team

HURRICANE KATRINA HAD TERRIBLE TIMING.

She swept into Hattiesburg, Mississippi, just as plans for the exciting rehabilitation of the Old Hattiesburg High School were about to be unveiled. She not only ruined the momentum of a critical project but caused enough damage to severely threaten its future.

Not only was this project going to save a treasured landmark; it was also designed to provide cultural and economic stimulation for downtown by turning the building into the University of Southern Mississippi's (USM) Department of Art and Design's new home. After the storm, an assessment team visited the site and discovered that part of the roof had been destroyed, load-bearing walls were severely damaged, and many of the boards covering the windows had fallen out. If the school wasn't sealed and repaired immediately, the team decided, the exposed building might not last long enough to secure funding for the planned rehab.

A CALL FOR HELP

"We put out a call nationwide for financial assistance," says Sarah Newton, president-elect of Historic Hattiesburg Downtown Association (HHDA) – the Main Street organization that owns the property and has been leading the renovation for the University. Bernice Linton, HHDA's executive director, turned to the Mississippi Main Street Association's Assistant Director, Bob Wilson, for help. He connected with Bob Donohue, program coordinator of Michigan's Main Street Oakland County, at the 2005 National Trust Conference in Portland, Ore., and then put the two in touch. When Donohue asked what he could do to help, Linton already had the Old High School at the top of her list.

Donohue checked out a website to see the damage to the already endangered building. Given the time-sensitive nature of the project, Main Street Oakland County (MSOC) and HHDA swung into action to build partnerships, solicit sponsors and skilled volunteers, fund raise, and coordinate the details to assemble a 10-day volunteer trip to stabilize the building in February.

Although the people of Hattiesburg were deeply concerned about the coastal region's devastating losses, says Newton, the community was afraid its inland location might lead their wounded downtown to be overlooked because people wouldn't realize how far-reaching Katrina's impact was. "For these reasons we are extremely grateful

for and proud to be a member of a network like Main Street; no downtown is overlooked, not even in the wake of our country's greatest natural disaster," says Newton.

THE SECRETS OF BEHIND-THE-SCENES ORGANIZATION

The Hattiesburg Main Street program drew up an outline of the work to be tackled, identified the necessary materials and equipment, sought funding, arranged for food and lodging, worked out volunteer coordination details, and planned for publicity to promote the event. Newton, who also works with the architecture firm of Albert & Associates, prepared blueprints that showed the school's exterior elevations, roof details, and floor plans so they could calculate the amount and types of materials required and develop a work plan that assigned teams to specific tasks.

For Oakland County, Donohue says everything fell into place after a January 11th press conference with Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson, who announced the volunteer project and called on community members to get involved. MSOC sent out several press releases, which led to newspaper and



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The Old Hattiesburg High School, a designated Mississippi Landmark that is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places, was just one of thousands of structures in southern Mississippi struck by sustained winds that exceeded 100 mph. The structure is actually two buildings, a three-story 1911 building with a four-story 1921 addition, designed by a prominent Hattiesburg architect in the Jacobethan style.

storm was that equipment down here was not easy to come by, especially for free or discounted prices," says Newton. Local contractors donated the use of a lift and a Bobcat, and Waste Management supplied the drop-off and delivery of dumpsters while the city waived the dumping fees. The organization also tapped another important partner, the Mississippi Heritage Trust (which is working with the National Trust for Historic Preservation), to get a \$2,500 Pilot Stabilization Project grant for damaged historic properties. The funding helped pay for additional equipment and supplies needed for the project.

Donohue recognized that a large group of partners would be necessary to make the project happen and that a lot of work needed to be done before heading to Mississippi. "I used all of the Sylvia Allen sponsorship techniques that I could think of – and they worked!" he says.

Due to the construction-oriented nature of the project, a wide range of sponsorship opportunities presented themselves. A bus company in Saginaw, Michigan, gave the Hurricane Response Team a discounted price for unlimited use of a tour bus for roundtrip travel as well as daily transportation in Hattiesburg. Several groups donated money, including National City Bank, the Oakland County Business Finance Corp., Oakland County Economic Development Corp., and Butzel Long Attorneys, in addition to funds raised separately by WWJ News Radio and Waterford, Michigan, resident Eddie Delbridge. Galaxy Transport Trucking Co. supplied a 50-foot truck and a driver to deliver the supplies. Spencer Roofing in Commerce, Michigan, sent a three-man roofing crew to tarp the school's roof the first week of February – cash contributions paid their airfare. Grace Centers of Hope in Pontiac, Michigan, sent a six-man construction crew to focus on stabilizing a master roof truss. And the Rochester Mills Beer Company packed 16 cases of brew for the volunteers to take the edge off long days of hard work. Donohue says they got everything they needed as well as a complement of volunteers of diverse incomes, race, education, occupations, and age.

"Sarah [Newton] noted that 'Divine Intervention' had to have been a part of this," says Donohue, "because how else do you explain securing a roofing and construction crew, \$34,000, huge amounts of materials, 50 sponsors, and bus transportation. What a great example of Main Street spirit! This stuff all came together in just six weeks!"

radio coverage that helped make "the ask" for donations. Tools and materials began pouring in: hard hats, lumber, nails, brooms, ladders, filter masks, scaffolding, and so much more.

"Whatever was not donated was purchased with part of the \$34,000 raised over a six-week period," says Donohue. He notes that they made a point of purchasing items from local Hattiesburg merchants, as well. More than 70 people volunteered for the trip, but only 40 could be selected.

HHDA focused on getting equipment while MSOC secured the necessary tools. "Our biggest obstacle after the

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BALANCING HARD WORK, APPRECIATION, AND FUN

By the end of their visit, the volunteers had accomplished a lot: cleaned up the site; removed 22-dumpsters' worth of debris and water-logged furniture and files; repaired the 16-by-16-foot hole in the roof; constructed a temporary, three-story tower to bolster a master roof truss; and boarded up open windows. And it all went off without any major on-the-job injuries, which can partly be attributed to the effective planning, organization, and communication between HHDA and MSOC.

To ensure the efficient use of everyone's time, two team leaders from each city were named to serve as point-people for information and direction. "Bernice and her husband Henry were on site every day to offer help and advice and ran countless errands for the team," says Donohue when describing the critical daily support of the Main Street executive director. "The project would absolutely not have been successful without her and Henry."

Floor captains, work crews, and crew chiefs were assigned their projects following an on-site

orientation and safety meeting. Volunteers signed waivers and received instructions and safety equipment, much of which was donated, as well as a tour of the entire building, details of their project's goals, and strategies to accomplish them.

Each organization appointed individuals to coordinate handling of food, lodging, press relations, volunteers, and the overall project.

For example, HHDA President Joe White arranged for free meals for the entire group and found that restaurants jumped at the opportunity to participate. Another HHDA officer, Bud Kirkpatrick, coordinated the press events and ensured that the newspaper and local NBC news affiliate were aware of what was going on. He also invited community leaders to events so they could thank MSOC. Jennifer Weir was charged with rallying Hattiesburg volunteers from USM, alumni of the Old Hattiesburg High School, a local National Guard-affiliated Youth Challenge program, neighborhood residents, and other interested citizens.

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Volunteers stayed in cabins at a nearby camp. For five days they worked from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but there was still plenty of time for fun. HHDA was determined to make this a positive experience. To help volunteers get settled in, HHDA led a walking tour of the historic district before taking them to a Mississippi Main Street Association welcome reception with Beverly Meng and Bob Wilson.

Everyone got a behind-the-scenes look at the renovation of the old Coca-Cola Bottling Company building, which is being converted to a music warehouse and restaurant. The volunteers also found time to tour the coastal region to bear witness to the devastation, which many team members said motivated them even more and helped mitigate how overwhelming the High School project initially seemed.

Each day, the group got to experience local flavor as many businesses jumped in to host a meal or event. And to build an even greater sense of purpose, the team headed over to the university for a presentation by the art department on its future plans for the site. During this presentation, the audience of about 100 people gave the volunteers a standing ovation.

Donohue estimates that the team accomplished more than \$150,000 worth of repairs to make a dent in the \$2 million worth of damages. This volunteer effort not only helped put the project back on track; it also boosted the morale of the community and warmed the hearts of many.

Since Main Street professionals are not ones to miss a publicity-generating event, HHDA arranged for two press conferences to promote the High School project: the first, with the mayor, kicked off the volunteer week, and the second showcased the amount of work that had been accomplished. Both Main Street programs received a lot of media attention in Michigan and Mississippi for organizing such a successful and moving project.

The final work day hit an emotional high note as the MSOC team raised the flag on the old flagpole, something that hadn't been done for 40 years. Then residents, USM students, the media, and others were taken on a tour of the 72,000-square-foot building.

"We, at the Main Street Center, are never surprised but are always moved by the tremendous amount of support and help the Main Street network provides its peer Main Street communities," said

ADOPT A MAIN STREET, STILL!

Although it has been almost a year since the devastating hurricanes of 2005 hit the Gulf Coast region, Main Street communities that bore the brunt of the storm still need your help. Many are still rebuilding structures, some are trying to get their Main Street offices together, and others are attempting to replace felled trees and banners that once dotted the streetscape. The outpouring of support and assistance from numerous Main Street programs has been invaluable in showing your fellow colleagues compassion and support, and showing the nation the dedication of the Main Street network.

need of everything and that no contribution is too big or too small. For example, Chevron donated money so the community could replace its Easter Bunny costume to make sure children could still enjoy the traditional parade and Easter egg hunt.

"Thank goodness for all the Main Street programs that have come to our rescue. I truly don't know what we would have done without them," says Davis.

"Please don't forget about us. We are all still trying to rebuild with little or no resources and are very appreciative of any help we do get."

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In Mississippi, Pascagoula's downtown was completely underwater, so now all of the street furniture is rusting and must be replaced. The organization is working on a program for associations and individuals to donate items for the downtown, from benches to planters, and Pascagoula Main Street will post a plaque with the name of the donor on it.

Rebecca Davis, Pascagoula's Main Street and events manager, says all of the Main Street communities that were hit are still in

If your community is committed to remembering the struggling Main Street programs in Louisiana and Mississippi, please take the time to discuss hosting a fund-raising event, sending skilled volunteers, or collecting items to donate to one of the affected organizations. The sky is the limit.

"When Rehoboth Beach Main Street started planning our Mardi Gras event, we knew we couldn't, in good conscience, have fun and raise money unless we raised money for folks in the New Orleans area who suffered from

Hurricane Katrina," says Main Street Manager Fay Jacobs. The organization started by looking at the list of affected communities on the National Trust Main Street Center's website and called a few to determine their needs before finding a match.

Rehoboth Beach Main Street, a boardwalk community, found it had an affinity for Houma Main Street in Louisiana because it was in the process of building a boardwalk. Rehoboth's weekend-long event featured 10 restaurants that hosted a Mardi Gras party with a fund-raising component. At the recent National Main Streets Conference in New Orleans, Jacobs presented Houma's Main Street manager, Ann Picou, with a check for \$2,000 raised from the Mardi Gras event.

Other ideas:

- Host a holiday event a few seasons early; for example, an early Christmas event could raise money to help your adopted community buy holiday decorations. Persuade local civic associations or school groups to hold bake sales and car washes.
- Sponsor a team of local contractors to help with repairs or work on rehabilitations.

- Ask attendees at your next special event to donate an item or gift cards to rebuild the local Main Street office.

- Solicit donations from your community. Thurmont Main Street in Maryland set up a Katrina Relief Committee and adopted Waveland, Mississippi. The committee issued a list of items that the community needed, such as file cabinets and fax machines for the local fire and police departments.
- Recruit local businesses to sell a special item and donate proceeds to a Main Street program. For example, a coffee roaster based in Washington state created a special Pascagoula Blend and donated the proceeds to Washington KARES, a nonprofit organization initiated by Walla Walla and Kirkland to help raise Katrina relief funds and items.

To view a list of Main Street communities affected by the hurricanes, visit www.mainstreet.org. For more ideas of what your program can do, please refer to the following Main Street News issues: October 2005, December 2005, March 2006.

Doug Loescher, director of the National Trust Main Street Center. "The commitment that MSOC has shown to the people of Hattiesburg through this project shows an outstanding dedication to the Main Street movement and provides leadership among Main Street communities in demonstrating how valuable and powerful communities helping each other can be."

Newton says she never dreamed of a Main Street collaborative event like this before Katrina. Although she says MSOC accomplished above and beyond what they set out to do or what Hattiesburg could have asked for, the community also went the extra mile to show its appreciation. The Michigan volunteers were really touched by the support from local residents and businesses and by the Southern hospitality.

One volunteer recalled a Southern comfort food potluck lunch that a neighborhood association hosted and another was charmed by a mailman who paused during his route to deliver some homemade shortbread cookies. All week, residents went out of their way to greet the volunteers and thank them. The week concluded with a big party featuring a locally well-known blues band and a presentation of photos snapped during the week. When saying goodbye, each volunteer received a gift bag with mementos such as soap to represent the clean up and a pewter ornament of one of the downtown's historic buildings.

"The neighboring residents, the [high school] alumni and their stories and memories of that wonderful old building, those who came in off the sidewalks to thank us for being there, cars honking horns as they passed, the radio interviewer who referred to us as the 'angels from Michigan,'" says volunteer Eddie Delbridge when listing all the people who touched her life in Hattiesburg. "What a joy to see how easy it is to make a difference in another's life and how surprising to see how much it changed mine. I'm sure we weren't even thinking of ourselves as heroes, although that seems to be what we became to the Hattiesburg Historic District."

STILL SO MUCH TO DO

For communities that find themselves dealing with similar problems, HHDA Assistant Director Linda McMurtrey advises that they first coordinate with the state offices. HHDA contacted the Mississippi Main Street Association and Mississippi Heritage Trust, which helped evaluate and assess damage to the hurricane-affected areas and acted as the clearinghouse to channel offers for assistance. Secondly, be specific about the kind of help that is needed. Giving volunteers a specific request helps spark action rather than leaving them wondering what they can do and watching their enthusiasm fizzle out.

Today, HHDA is soliciting bids to replace the high school's roof. Through Hattiesburg Landmark Preservation, Inc., the 501 (c)(3) arm of HHDA, the program received a Community Heritage Preservation Grant of \$400,000 from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, which will be matched locally with \$100,000. The next steps will include a public fund-raising campaign for the overall project, which HHDA estimates will cost approximately \$13 million.

Newton attributes the success of this project to "a strong desire to save the school, extreme generosity and humanity, hard work, and Divine Intervention (how else could you explain six consecutive days of the most gorgeous weather South Mississippi has ever seen?"

Donohue and other members of the team hope this project will spur other programs to get involved and make a difference in communities still recovering from the hurricanes. The volunteers already have planned to return for the grand opening of the USM Department of Art and Design. In addition, MSOC will be incorporating the lessons learned from this project in a report this fall to help Oakland County Main Streets better prepare and respond to disasters on all levels.

"We are definitely not the same people who left Oakland County on February 24th," says Donohue. "For all the right reasons we will never be the same."

Ready to plan your Main Street volunteer trip to help your neighbors in the Gulf Coast region? Visit www.oakgov.com/peds for more information about this project.

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