

I don't believe in coincidence anymore. I do believe in God. We can see His hand in all of our efforts in rebuilding Pearlington, Mississippi. Our involvement in Pearlington began in September 2005. Willowbrook, along with many other faith based organizations, first reached out to those who had evacuated to Huntsville from Mississippi and Louisiana as they waited in local hotels. It was our efforts to help these families retrieve household items from their storm ravaged homes that first brought us to the little town of Pearlington, Mississippi. It was faith in God that allowed my husband to drop me off on 565 with two men we had never met before. With a trailer hitched behind the truck, we were on our way to Harvey, Louisiana to help the Champagne family retrieve furniture from their apartment. Some of the youth from Willowbrook had already done a mini extreme makeover on a Huntsville apartment for the Champagne family and we wanted to see this project to completion. It was on that trip that we stopped by the forgotten little town of Pearlington, Mississippi to drop off much needed supplies. As we drove into the little town, we were detoured through back streets to avoid the main highway, which was still blocked by fallen trees. After driving through neighborhoods with walls of homes scattered like leaves and roofs sunken to the ground, we turned the corner and the first major building we saw was the First Southern Baptist Church of Pearlington. The inside had been gutted. All that remained was the exterior walls, the roof, the interior studs and a concrete slab. But it was a welcoming sight. To us, it was a sign of hope. A sign of good things to come.

For two years, we have returned to Pearlington with crowbars, hammers and paint brushes in hand. Labor Day Weekend 2007 marks our 25th mission trip, with future trips planned through October 2007. Our volunteers come from all over North Alabama, from many different denominations, all with a heart for the Lord and for missions. Side by side with the residents of Pearlington, and with God as our contractor, we have come so far. But there is still much to be done.

Sometimes we get discouraged, but those moments are brief because we are reminded of Nehemiah. When the walls of Jerusalem fell, Nehemiah began to rebuild the walls one brick at a time. The people told Nehemiah to come down from that wall, that he was wasting his time. But Nehemiah would not. He could not, for he was doing a great thing for the Lord. At times we feel like our efforts are so small when compared to the amount of destruction that was caused by Hurricane Katrina. But when we think of Nehemiah, each supply drive, each mission trip, each plea for help that we make becomes one more brick of hope as we join other volunteer organizations from across North America in the efforts to rebuild this coastal town.

When you drive into Pearlington, you will see volunteers on roofs and inside houses. They will be doing anything from wiring to plumbing to finishing sheetrock and painting. In a town that was once divided by racial lines, you now see residents and volunteers of all races joining together in service, in fellowship, and in praise to the one who brought us together.

You will still find houses at every stage of completion. Some houses, like the home of George and Margaret Ladner, are completely finished and the FEMA trailers have been removed, giving hope to all that life CAN return to normal. In this older town in Mississippi, you will find many houses that are all new construction, like Andrea Coote's, because the old house had to be completely bulldozed. Yet there may be an empty FEMA trailer still in the yard, awaiting its removal by FEMA workers, an eerie reminder of the last year and a half and the awful living conditions these residents have endured. Some families like Eddie and Lorraine Ladner, are only now finding themselves fortunate enough to have a house being framed....a long way still to go, but a light at the end of the tunnel.

And then there are those who haven't been so fortunate. Residents who still sit in FEMA trailers day after day looking at an empty lot where their home used to stand. Unable to begin rebuilding either because they don't have the strength or they don't have the money and help

hasn't reached them yet. Many families are still in mourning. Mourning for a life that was washed away by the storm. Mourning for a broken relationship that couldn't withstand the stress that rebuilding brings with it. Mourning for a loved one who passed away because of the storm or for the tragic loss of a life since the storm. And, because we have become like family, we mourn with them.

But among the entire community, there is a feeling of hope. Hope that comes with each group of volunteers that drives into this little town. Hope that comes with each new piece of lumber or sheetrock that enters the community. Hope for a town that once was forgotten, but who now knows that there are thousands of volunteers who, by the grace of God, will never forget and who return again and again to **Rebuild Pearlinton....one brick at a time.**

Please visit our website www.pearlingtonms.com

Note: Jennifer Johnson was recognized by The Volunteer Center of Madison County for Outstanding Disaster Relief and was honored as the Volunteer of the Year by the Madison Baptist Association for the work that she and her husband, Keith, and their daughters have done. Her daughters, Meg Johnson and Emily Johnson have both been awarded the President's Volunteer Service Award for their outstanding service.