

'Paying It Forward' -- New Orleans Congregation's Outreach Benefits Ethiopian Children

Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa  

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In late August of 2005, the St. Paul's Episcopal Church and School in the Lakeview community of New Orleans was under 10 feet of stagnant water in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The historic brick church, with its 15-foot, 150-year-old Tiffany stained-glass windows, was directionless and in need of assistance.

At roughly the same time, an Episcopal Navy chaplain, Capt. William R. Hood, was in search of a new mission. Hood, a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom who had seen combat service with U.S. Marines, needed to reset his own compass. He found himself in search of a challenge greater than the average, stable congregation would probably provide.

The Bishop of the Armed Forces who endorsed Episcopal clergy and chaplains' work at the time, Episcopal Bishop George Packard, initially asked Hood to look into St. Paul's because he felt the distressed church would be something very much in the vein of what Hood was suited for.

Packard insisted Hood go to New Orleans for an interview with St. Paul's, to see first-hand the carnage wrought by the storm -- and the emotional toll Katrina had taken on its congregation. Structurally, the church was suffering from having been flooded. Emotionally, Hood said, the people were just as poorly off.

"Will was passionate with an off-the-cuff approach to getting things done," said Lisa Davis, development director of Paul's Episcopal School Church and School. She joined the church in 2007, almost exactly two years after Katrina, and in the midst of Hood's efforts to bring about what she called "a new normal."

"His drive and determination poured into his work and his natural leadership abilities enabled people to trust in him and his vision for the future," said Davis.

Now, four years later, the congregation, the community of Lakeview and the Will Hood Fund are supporting orphaned African children in Ethiopia, as part of an ongoing outreach program called The Supply Project. Hood terms that process a story of recovery, rebuilding and grace.

Given the circumstances, he felt he understood the shape of things after his first visit to New Orleans. The bald, 53-year-old Hood is a 23-year sea-service veteran. A native Texan, originally from the Spring Branch section of Houston, Hood now hangs his hat in the Museum District of that city. He's been a priest for 26 years, having been ordained in 1983.

"I saw devastation on both personal and spiritual levels with the Marines in Iraq," said Hood, "Rebuilding and grace at St. Paul's is the result of changes both environmentally and within the parishioners, and being a part of that rebuilding process might have been just what I personally needed."

St. Paul's is geographically located in the center of the community it serves. When the 17th Street Canal Levee broke, Hood said, the largely upper-middle class congregation was faced with not only the loss of their own property, but also of their spiritual anchor point.

Hood, a quiet man, chooses his words carefully, crafting an overall message with woven contexts and deliberate sincerity.

"In our first meeting, Will was wearing shorts and sandals, and although he appeared relaxed, he also had a very intense and straightforward disposition," said Davis. "Will was proud of the impact the church was having on rebuilding the

community, but extremely humble when it came to praise. It was very clear in our conversations, he understood the pain and devastation people were feeling, and he cared immensely about them and wanted to do all that he could to help."

During his interview with the church directors, he said he made only two promises. "First, I told them I would not be afraid, no matter what happened to the parish. Second, that I would love the parish and its people every day, with God's help."

Grace is a common theme with Hood. Eventually, he would leave St. Paul's, on a course which would take him to East Africa, but the ties and the foundation of 'grace' he helped instill there would play a major role in tangible support for the Ethiopian orphans he helps now. He can see, looking back, there are several parallels between what he witnessed there and what he sees in his current assignment.

"This whole effort is predicated on the 'Pay It Forward' philosophy," said Hood. "There is an element of faith here; the children will benefit not just now, walking to school in their new shoes with their new backpacks, but in the future. Somehow, this all matters beyond today."

"The longer I am here, the better I understand the relevance of the word 'grace' and its significance at St. Paul's," said Davis. "For a community that shared so much loss and tragedy to emerge with a greater sense of the blessings in their lives and the mission to find ways in which to share them is amazing."

Hood would serve as rector of the church for three years and interim head of the school for 18 months. During that time, he said, he saw the church benefit from both public and private assistance, once again becoming an anchor for the community as it rebuilt. Contractors, volunteers and relief workers used the church as a central location as efforts to help Lakeview recover took hold.

Donations of money, labor and materials, combined with federal dollars (through FEMA and other agencies) eventually rebuilt the church and the school. The process of transitioning the church happened through physical labor, even as the church solidified its position as the physical and moral anchor point to help rebuild Lakeview. Hood and the two people helping orchestrate the business aspects of the church's recovery worked long months, figuring out how to navigate FEMA rules and regulations in order to raise the almost \$2 million they would need.

Almost everything needed to be fixed; only the stained-glass windows had survived unscathed.

"Back in 1965, Hurricane Betsy blew out several of St. Paul's stained-glass windows," said Hood. "The glass pieces were collected, sent back to Germany and made whole again. Those enormous, beautiful and historically significant windows were returned to the church, and they survived Katrina intact. It was amazing."

"Construction crews left their bright lights on inside the church one evening, and I saw this intense, colorful light shining through the largest window, the one at the front of the sanctuary," said Hood. "It was dark outside, but that light lit up the whole street in front of the church. I almost wrecked my truck. The light beaming through the stained glass was a sign of hope -- a beacon. I asked them to leave those lights on every night after that, and they did."

"When I first got here, the church and school looked remarkably well compared to the rest of the neighborhood, which was still approximately 70 percent destroyed from the storm," said Davis. "When people visited the church or school, they were shocked at how quickly we had come back, and impressed by how much we were doing to help rebuild our area."

"The parish," Hood said, "wasn't always as giving as it is now. It took parishioners losing everything to realize humility and to understand through having to receive the gifts of support, through no merit or possibility of payback, the lesson of generosity and of giving from the heart. I would remind them; 'Look at all these people the Lord's given to you; look what they're giving you,' I said to them. The parishioners now have a sense of grace and generosity which, I think, is greater than it was prior to the storm."

Hood said a corner was turned in the church's center of gravity and understanding of it's self after when so many volunteers came in to assist in the rebuild efforts. It was so humbling to see the volunteers who withstood the intense heat of summer time New Orleans with no other agenda than to help the hurting community. When you see that kind of love and grace with no other purpose than to help with no price or pay back affects your out look on what is important in life.

This had a huge impact on the children of St. Paul's school and church, Hood said. "The donations, the grace and care that was extended to the people of St. Paul's was certainly inspiring, but more importantly reminded them they were not alone. It was a lesson for their future that life is not faced alone, but with the help of others."

There had been 200 to 300 students at the school before the hurricane, and afterward there were 40 to 60 'remnant' students who stayed on. The demands on Hood, both from the parents and their circumstances, gave way to a

cooperative spirit and industrious work. From that labor grew a motto; "Pay It Forward," which Davis says they still use to this day.

"We all learned a lot from Will while he was here," said Davis. "One of the greatest lessons we learned was that we must always share with others through the gifts we have received -- or, more simply, we must 'pay it forward'."

"We told him we would begin an outreach program in his honor, to help children in need all over the world," said Davis. "St. Paul's considers this our 'call to duty,' and when Will asked us to begin a supply drive to collect shoes, socks and school supplies to send to the needy children in Africa, we were thrilled to help."

"The church and school have gone full-force in trying to maximize our efforts by reaching out to other churches, businesses, and community organizations to rally their support," said Davis. "We even received a grant from the National Association of Episcopal Schools to help with shipping expenses. For many of us who admire and respect Will, The Supply Project has become a way to stay connected to him and show him how much we appreciate and thank him for what he has done for us."

The Will Hood Fund, as a mechanism within the larger St. Paul's outreach program, is a vehicle for paying forward the goodwill shown to the church since 2005. The congregation, which Hood characterized as now having unity of purpose and direction, has been supplying donated shoes, socks, backpacks and school supplies to the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa's Religious Affairs Director's Office at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti -- Hood's new posting -- with regularity.

Supplies are purchased in Louisiana and elsewhere, collected at the church by the development director and shipped through the U.S. Postal Service.

"When we started The Supply Project, volunteers and school representatives reached out to people and businesses through the internet and media," said Davis. "Word spread, and community members, groups and businesses began contacting us to ask how they could get involved. For us, we have to be reminded that after the storm, we received a lot of help from all over the world, from people that did not know us and would also never meet us. Our stories share a similarity, and clarity that help is needed everywhere."

"The response has been phenomenal. Since April, we have shipped over 450 pairs of shoes, and countless socks and school supplies," said Davis. "Local businesses have volunteered to be drop-off locations, people have donated money towards shipping expenses -- and through the effort of one parishioner, the local Rotary Club donated almost 50 backpacks filled with supplies, along with hundreds of shoes and shirts, hats and school supplies. It has been wonderful to be a part of this experience."

Once the boxes of donated goods arrive on Camp Lemonnier, they're delivered to Hood for distribution. His position and scope of responsibilities causes him to interact with a network of Army civil affairs -- CA is the jargon -- specialists throughout East Africa. Those CA soldiers are in towns and villages sprinkled throughout CJTF-HOA's 13-nation area of interest, working with community leaders on projects funded by a variety of international agencies and non-governmental organizations. Also key in the interaction between American troops and locals are the U.S. embassies throughout the region.

As the mail accumulates, Hood looks for CA teams to receive them and then books space-available transportation for the donations on whatever military aircraft are scheduled to make logistics flights. He relies on the expertise of the CA team members to distribute them to where they'll do the most good.

One of those beneficiaries is an orphanage in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, called Kebebtsehay Children's Home. The civil servant who runs the day-to-day operations there is a man named Aschenaki Teferra, who knows Hood from his interaction with the orphans there. The orphans he looks after in Addis represent only a fraction of those who have benefitted from the efforts of St. Paul's volunteers and Lakeview community donors.

"It helps support the orphanage, the children, to know there are other people in the world who feel they're important," said Teferra, whose native language is Amharic. "All of these items are very useful to the children. These donations allow us to divert money to things the children absolutely have to have; the formula, the diapers; those are essential."

Davis said she would like to get to know the children the church and school are helping, but she is just as happy knowing their efforts were going to a cause Hood endorsed. She indicated she would like to hear from them how the children are using the shoes, socks and backpacks, but "I'm not sure verbal communication is always necessary," she said. "[Having the opportunity to speak to the children] is more emotional than literal. I would want to see how they live and listen to their stories. We want them to know that we care, and that we want to help make their lives and futures better."

"I think most people probably knew Will would not be here forever," Davis said. "Will was a force of nature who was able to help get us back on our feet again. For some people, I think it was a frightening feeling to know that he would no longer be at the helm, guiding us and supporting us through some of the long and difficult days, but mostly I think

people knew how lucky we were to have had him for the time he was here. Will is deeply missed, but through our gratitude and the miracles that happened while he was here – his spirit lives on."

"St. Paul's has and always will find ways to support our community," she said, "but helping the children in East Africa has given us the opportunity to extend our outreach beyond our immediate area while helping someone -- someone who gave us so much -- give to others."

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