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SUMMER 2006



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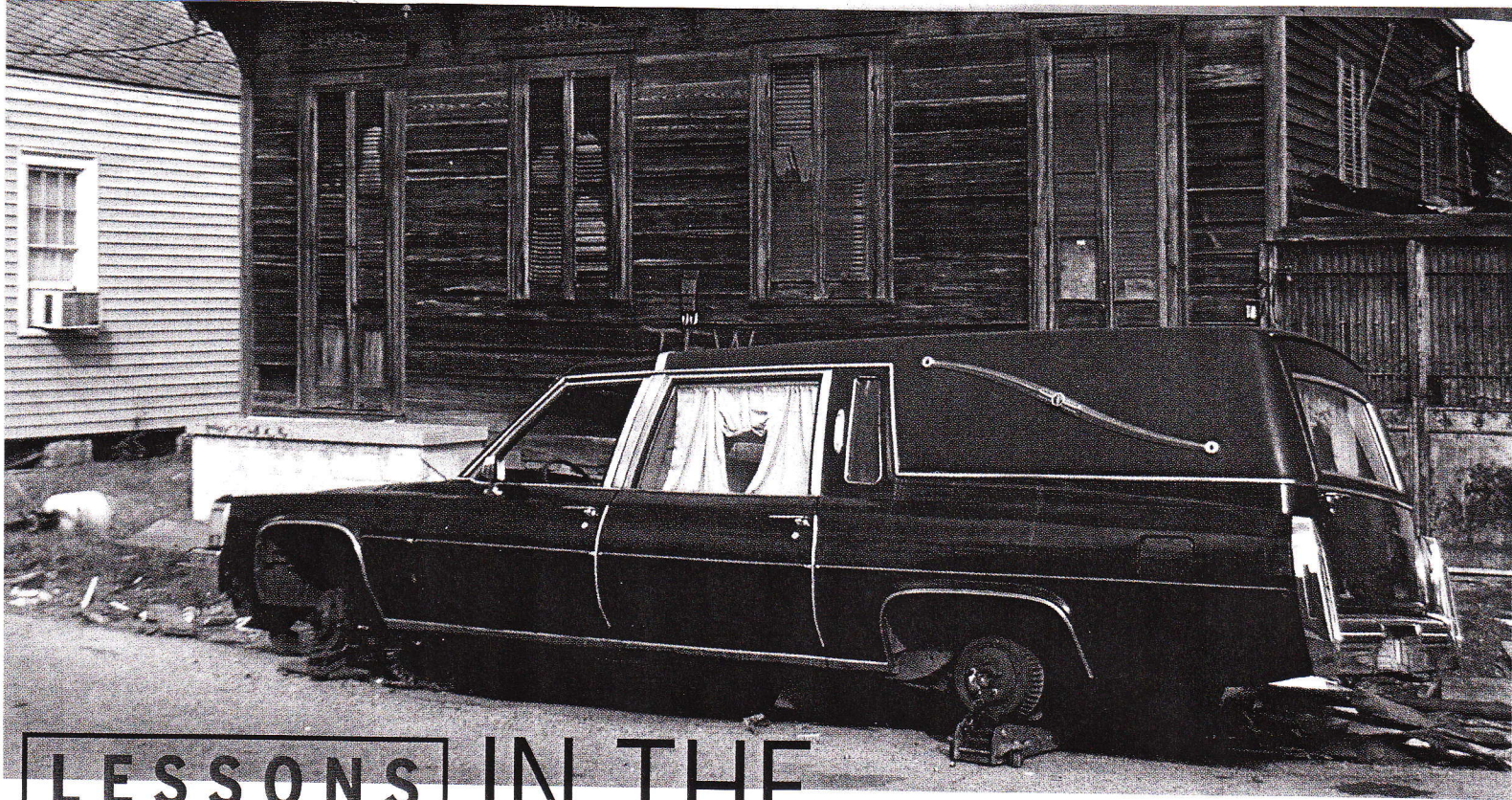
Soul of the Machine:

THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF THE NEW MEDIA PROGRAM

The Big Uneasy:

LENDING A HAND & LEARNING IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

PURCHASE
COLLEGE
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LESSONS IN THE CLASSROOMS OF LIFE

PURCHASE COLLEGE STUDENTS LEARN TO ENGAGE THE WORLD BY HELPING OUT IN NEW ORLEANS



While many of his college-aged contemporaries were donning sunglasses and slathering on suntan lotion for winter break, Bill Reese (senior, New Media) donned a protective white jumpsuit, dust mask, and gloves to enter a moldering, ranch-style home in the Lakeview section of New Orleans. The house had been completely submerged for two weeks in the flooding that followed Hurricane Katrina.

Reese was one of about 30 Purchase College students who gave up their winter vacations to sleep on cots, wield hammers and crowbars, and learn firsthand what's involved in a disaster of this magnitude.

Their first glimpse of the now infamous Lower Ninth Ward was unforgettable.

"Nothing can prepare [you] for what comes into view driving over the North Claiborne Avenue Bridge; the devastation is unbelievable," Reese says.

Dramatic Writing senior Jeff Stein couldn't believe what he was seeing either.

"The force of the water after the levee broke was enough to wash away homes. Now, there are just planks of wood and concrete foundations. It is apocalyptic," he says.

For Jessica Labarbera, a Journalism sophomore, the sight also called to mind the devastation's human impact.

"Equally destructive," she says, "is the loss of the social and familial networks that define neighborhood stability and social health."

AT WORK IN THE LIVING CITY

But the Purchase students were not there to rubberneck. Some were earning independent study credits through an affiliation with the Center for the Living City at Purchase College. Their photography and reports have been gathered into an exhibition entitled "Learning from Disaster: New Orleans after Katrina." The exhibition was a

collaboration among the College, the Center for the Living City, and the Museum of the City of New York, which mounted the show this May and June.

The other students were participating in the Purchase College Alternative Break Trip. This program was coordinated through the Office of Student Life to promote greater engagement with society and its issues. The students worked with non-profit organizations to help clear debris and ready homes for reconstruction. Funding from the Purchase College Foundation and donors to the College's Annual Fund helped the students with the costs of their trips.

Everyone learned valuable lessons about human resilience and determination, says Valentina Sherlock, an Environmental Studies junior.

"Handing over the remains of someone's I.D. card to the person who has spent their life in the house that you are gutting really teaches you what's important," she says. "It's all about how you come out of these trials; how you learn and grow from them."

For Amanda Johnson, a senior in Art History, there were also personal rewards for all the hard work.

"It was a kind of bonding experience," she says. "It opened my eyes to the non-profit aspect of work, of people helping people. The physical labor was rewarding, but helping others was even better."

IN THE SERVICE OF LEARNING

These kinds of service/learning opportunities are likely to become a more common feature of a Purchase College education, says Jonathan Levin, dean of Humanities at Purchase. He and Denise Mullen, dean of the School of Art+Design, helped organize the show at the Museum of the City of New York.

"I sense that students today are hungry for the opportunity to be involved and engaged. We've seen that academia can be a bit closed off from the world, and this is a really great way to connect the intellectual with the practical and the ethical implications of what's happening," Dean Levin says.

The Purchase students who did independent study through the College's collaboration with the Center for the Living City, for



example, were introduced to residents and members of the New Orleans environmental, social, and economic communities.

They learned to ask informed questions about human rights and other urban issues and how to communicate more complete information about urban issues to a wider audience.

The Center for the Living City was founded by award-winning journalist, urban scholar, and author Roberta Brandes Gratz and architect Stephen A. Goldsmith. They were inspired by the work of Jane Jacobs, the legendary writer, activist, and urban critic who died in April. The Center's aim is to improve public understanding of the complex, organic operation of the modern city. The two founders accompanied the Purchase College students to New Orleans, helped them with their projects, and helped curate the Museum of the City of New York show.

"It's sad to say, of course, but no better way exists to observe, understand, and report on the connected parts that add up to a whole city than to look at a city when it has become totally disconnected," Dean Levin explains.

In addition to the exhibition, accounts of the students' experiences have appeared in campus and Westchester County newspapers.

A PROTOTYPE FOR ENGAGEMENT

The College is preparing the groundwork for more such service/learning opportunities in the future.

Over spring break, for instance, a second group of Purchase students returned to New Orleans to continue with the cleanup, while another group traveled to Philadelphia to work with an organization that assists low-income AIDS/HIV patients.

And, a student organization called Purchase Alternative Service Trips (PAST) has been formed to help organize volunteer trips such as these each year.

Dean Levin expects that the collaboration with the Center for the Living City will prove to be a prototype for future for-credit service/learning opportunities.

"Perhaps down the road, students will be able to take an entire semester of service/learning to earn credit toward their degrees," he says. "In any event, I'm confident that we'll do a lot more in this area."

For one thing, these trips teach lessons you won't find in a classroom.

As Bill Reese concludes in one of his essays: "In the end, the government, the insurance companies, FEMA, the Urban Land Institute, and the national mainstream press had turned their backs on these people. Yet here were perfect strangers coming out of the woodwork to offer them a helping hand and give them a small sense of hope. We were doing for these residents what we would hope that other people would do for us if we were in the same position." ■

