



Hope for Tomorrow:

North Carolina Young CPAs Make History in New Orleans

BACK: Cherie Bardwell, Tom Pender, Kiara Felder, David McClure, Mark LaCour, Regina Rudolph, Jenny Parlier
FRONT: Brian Gallagher, Scott Barham, Tim Hooks, Damon Yudichak

On August 29, 2005, an invader assaulted the Gulf Coast and left in its wake a war zone that stretched across three states. Lives were lost. Businesses vanished. And the most powerful nation on earth was forced to confront the ugliness of its own vulnerabilities.

As Americans watched the news in the days after Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, many wondered, “What can I do?” Charities like the Red Cross and Salvation Army received record donations. Clothes, food, and baby items poured in from around the country. FEMA established a distribution center at the Biloxi Community Center while displaced homeowners lived in donated tents a mile down the road. Thousands of people were mobilized to help with the immediate needs of the affected areas. Yet, through it all, one question remained: What will the long-term recovery efforts be after the event fades from the public’s attention?

Answering the Call

Seven young CPAs from North Carolina decided to answer that question. Eager to apply their professional skills, they came together as the nation’s first knowledge-based volunteer team to assist with long-term recovery efforts. Additionally, three young CPAs from Louisiana joined in for the week-long experiment in New Orleans two years after Katrina. The goal was not the physical work of swinging hammers or hanging siding. Rather, it was the fiscal work of helping small business owners and non-profits get back on their feet in the wake of the storms.

Known for its music, food, and social life, New Orleans is a “cultural economy.” It runs on small businesses such as restaurants, music venues, art galleries, and street merchants. If New Orleans and other cities along the Gulf Coast are going to recover, it will be on the strength of their businesses. And no one speaks the language of business better than CPAs.

Getting to Know You

Unsure of what was ahead, the team overcame geographic boundaries by collaborating online and through conference calls. They met each other for the first time on Monday night of the project. After two hours, it seemed as though they had known each other for two months. North Carolina CPA and New Orleans native, Kiala Felder, put it this way, “The dynamics of the team worked surprisingly well together. Any time you come together with people you are just meeting for the first time... you often don’t know what to expect.

I was happy that we as a group worked well together... I think it’s a true testament to the spirit of the project and the characteristics of the people who volunteered their time to participate.”

On Tuesday morning, the team arrived at the office of Operation HOPE, a national financial literacy agency based in Los Angeles. Immediately after the storms, Operation HOPE opened locations in Louisiana and Mississippi. The partnership was a no-brainer—Operation HOPE provided the infrastructure, and the CPA volunteers provided the labor.

Taking Care of Business

The set-up for the week was straightforward. Through advanced publicity, Operation HOPE invited “clients” to its office for an hour or so of free consulting with a CPA. Questions ranged from the fundamentals of writing a business plan to sophisticated tax questions. Working together in pairs during these sessions, the CPAs provided assistance on technical matters and also in the form of feedback about ideas not previously considered by the small businesses or non-profits. Louisiana CPA, Brian Gallagher, was amazed by the wide variety of people who sought the team’s expertise. Gallagher described the clients as “everyone from businesses trying to get started back after the storm to people in the area wanting to start non-profit organizations.” He continued, “Our ability to act as business advisors and leverage our experience to help small business owners will be vital to the rebuilding [effort].”

In addition to the daily coaching sessions, the team conducted several evening seminars throughout the week. Those unable to attend individualized sessions during the day showed up after hours for more generalized topics such as what small business owners should know, starting and running a small business, and an overview of Quick Books for non-accountants.

Although there to work, the team experienced some internal, educational opportunities as well. Members toured areas of the city where the damage is still evident. Some were surprised to see areas that seemed as if the damage had immediately occurred prior to their arrival instead of two years earlier. One day, over a po-boy lunch, the team listened to local professor Dr. Janet Speyrer, Associate Dean for Research and Professor of Economics at the University of New Orleans, as she explained Katrina’s effect on the city and its current condition.

How Did They Do?

In just four days, the team of ten helped over one hundred small businesses and non-profits. How did the clients respond? Danny Blackburn, a New Orleans resident struggling to re-start his business described the help as exactly what he needed. “It was a step-by-step question-


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answer session... I walked out knowing now I can... methodically get to where I need to go.”

No one predicted such results. Even Operation HOPE, who’s in the business of providing this kind of assistance, was amazed at the efficiency of the project. Operation HOPE’s regional director, Oliver Bell, was involved with all aspects of the project and said afterwards, “What happened this week was significant. Working with the CPAs, we developed an efficient way to provide meaningful assistance to those making an honest effort to get back on their feet. There’s no reason this can’t work again—here or anywhere else, for that matter.”

Next Steps

There are no shortages of opportunities for more CPAs to help with the larger recovery efforts both in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. North Carolina CPA David McClure has traveled to New Orleans many times, before and after the storm. At the end of the week, McClure concluded, “From a business standpoint, I was shocked at what bad shape the City was in more than two years after the storm. I enjoyed the experience of helping people, but I left with a feeling of how much still needed to be done.”

With its initial success, the team delivered the proof of concept: National volunteers can help in a professional capacity that extends well beyond the physical rebuilding effort. So, what is the next opportunity? Planning is now underway for multi-state volunteer teams in May, July, and November. The week-long projects will occur in both New Orleans and Gulfport/Biloxi. And guess what? **The Gulf Coast Service Camp isn’t just for Young CPAs anymore.** We want CPAs from all backgrounds and experiences. If you’re interested in finding out more about these opportunities, please visit www.ncacpa.org. You can also contact NCACPA staff member, Tom Pender, at (919) 469-1040. 



Team Members Brian Gallagher, Scott Barham, and Jenny Parlier



Team Member David McClure gives a presentation on how to start a small business.



Bill Norris, a native of New Orleans and volunteer of Operation Hope, was an excellent tour guide and project/client coordinator for the group.



Team Members Damon Yudichak and Kiala Felder share knowledge with a local man.