

Voluntourism brings out the best

Visitors willing to give their time and energy transform New Orleans and touch lives.

BY STEPHEN PERRY



Voluntourism. It is an interesting “buzzword” in the travel industry these days, but in New Orleans we have seen its power.

During the last three and a half years, New Orleans hospitality industry has benefitted greatly from this newly touted form of travel, which combines a travel experience with the opportunity to get your hands dirty, to expend some sweat equity and, more importantly, giving you the opportunity to touch lives. Good people have given their elbow grease, lots of sweat, the occasional blood and quite often tears to help our city in its ongoing rebirth. The tears have been tears of joy and gratitude for the possibilities made into reality — tears for a job well done.

More often than not, convention and meetings groups that have come to New Orleans, whether a professional association, tradeshow or corporation, have incorporated some form of community service into their agendas. The buzz phrase in the corporate world is “corporate social responsibility,” and no other city has been able to offer CSR opportunities like New Orleans. Engaging a group of people in a community

service project has proven to be a great exercise in team building and a true gift to the city.

Tour groups, church organizations, fraternal organizations, entertainment-based groups and television shows have all lent their efforts and focus to voluntourism. The media has paid attention, as well they should, and has told countless good news stories showcasing the generosity of so many.

Speaking of so many, the city witnessed the most inspiring of these outpourings when 37,000 attendees landed in the city this past July for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s gathering. It was the largest convention to be held in New Orleans, certainly since August 2005, and perhaps one of the most meaningful. Decked out in brightly colored t-shirts, all the 37,000 plus took to the streets, parks, schools and playgrounds of the city, giving more than 222,000 hours towards our city’s continuing recovery.

Shouts of “thank you for coming to our city” and “thank you for all you are doing” echoed throughout the city streets. It was not uncommon to hear automobiles honking their horns in gratitude as flocks of ELCA teens

walked the streets of the French Quarter, Central Business District and the city’s Warehouse District, going to and from meetings, attractions and the Louisiana Superdome, where they gathered for evening activities.

To say these five days in New Orleans was inspirational is an understatement. And as if to say thanks as well, the weather gods smiled upon the city and the teens as a “cool front” — if you can imagine such a thing in New Orleans in July — brought sunshine and dry air to make the hauling and trimming, the landscaping and painting a little easier to bear.

I’ve said this and many others have said the same: New Orleans would not be as far along in its restoration if not for the more than 2 million people who have given of their personal time to gut, tear down, clean, clear, rebuild, repair, repaint, refurbish, and recreate homes, schools, libraries, parks, playgrounds and neighborhood restaurants. We all hope an opportunity like this does not come often, but we are a better city and better people for it.

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