

Hometown Heroes

JAZZING UP THE BIG EASY

While some high school students spent their spring break relaxing on sandy beaches and soaking up the sun, members of the jazz ensemble at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Ill. (pop. 12,419), traveled to the heart of storm-ravaged New Orleans to help reignite its musical fire.

For seven days in March, 56 students led a caravan through the Big Easy that helped build a home for displaced professional musicians and also put instruments in the hands of students whose music programs were decimated by Hurricane Katrina.

"It was the most amazing trip I've ever been on in all my years of teaching," says James Warrick,



Band director James Warrick is proud of his students, who head the school's jazz studies program. "The students got in the trenches and did something significant." Warrick conceived the trip in 2006 after taking a Gray Line bus tour through New Orleans, where he witnessed the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane that left much of the city underwater, contributed



56 students at New Trier High School brought more than 500 instruments to New Orleans.

to more than 1,800 deaths and inflicted roughly \$81 billion in damages to the Gulf Coast. Warrick's teary-eyed tour guide made an emotional plea to her passengers that day. "As we were winding the streets, she said somebody on this bus should do something," Warrick says. "I turned to my wife and said, 'That's us.'"

When Warrick returned to Illinois, he devised an ambitious fund-raising plan for the jazz group to shore up the Crescent City's musical foundation. It involved a 16-hour telethon on public television and simulcast on the Internet, the recording and selling of an original CD and a series of lectures to immerse students in the history and culture of New Orleans.

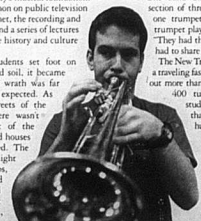
But since Warrick's students set foot on the Big Easy's waterlogged soil, it became apparent that the storm's wrath was far worse than any of them expected. As their bus circled the streets of the hard-hit community, there wasn't much left to see. Most of the remaining, badly damaged houses were dark and abandoned. The neighborhood's primary light source was street lamps, which illuminated the red Xs the National Guard spray-painted on front doors after the storm,

indicating that a dead body was found inside. "Looking out the window and seeing rows and rows of abandoned houses, I thought it would end sometime, and it never did," says Carrie Furniss, a sophomore trombone player. "I was tearing up. This was my first look at New Orleans."

The jazz ensemble brought more than 500 instruments, worth about \$300,000, into schools that desperately needed them.

"One band director said his trumpet section of three or four guys had only one trumpet between them," junior trumpet player Elliot Ostrowski says. "They had their own mouthpieces, but had to share the instrument."

The New Trier musicians also opened a traveling fashion boutique that handed out more than 500 donated dresses and 400 masks to New Orleans' students for prom, a tradition that became a rarity after the hurricane. "It was so fantastic to see the girls giggling with their friends and commenting on how they looked. They were so thankful," Furniss says. Before their departure,



Performing for students in New Orleans, the jazz ensemble contributed \$75,000 and three days worth of manual labor to help build a Habitat for Humanity home in Muscadine Village, which provides residences to artists displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

For some new acquaintances, Hino Kawahama, meeting a woman there who lost her father to the hurricane and saw her remaining family scatter across the country became the trip's most emotional moment—and a rallying cry for the future. "I make a promise that we will never forget what happened here," Kawahama says. "I promised her that we will come back." ★

Story by Jim Deakin of Chicago

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The New Trier group presented a \$75,000 check to Habitat for Humanity (above) and pitched in for a house-painting project.

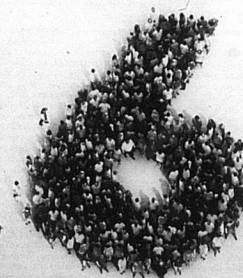


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