

Internship Report: lowernine.org

For eight heat-scorching weeks, I had the absolute pleasure of working with lowernine.org as their projects intern. Lowernine.org was founded in 2007 as a long-term disaster recovery organization post-Katrina following the organization Emergency Communities and their original first response efforts from 2005-2007. To date, lowernine.org has fully rebuilt 83 Lower Ninth Ward homes, and done repair and renovation work on over 200 more. This intimately localized organization focuses on bringing original Lower Ninth Ward residents back to their properties, many of which have been passed down through generations. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward was 98.1% African-American, and more than 60% of the population lived below the average mean income of the country, yet enjoyed the highest rate of homeownership of any neighborhood in the city and one of the highest rates of black homeownership in the nation. The Lower Ninth Ward has the lowest return home rate compared to the rest of the city of New Orleans and has received the least amount of funding and support in their recovery process. After only spending a matter of weeks here, it is hard to ignore the racism that much of the city of New Orleans casts onto this beautiful and vibrant community. There is an expression in the recovery community, "Disasters don't discriminate." Disasters may not discriminate, but recoveries absolutely do and lowernine.org exists to right this wrong. I have met so many beautiful and incredible residents of this community and listened, for sometimes hours at a time,

about their experiences with Hurricane Katrina and the continuous heartbreak they endured throughout their journeys to come back home.

As a projects intern, my responsibilities were essential to providing a link between our office and work sites. This included checking in with our long-term volunteers and assigning them specific work sites. I got to know these volunteers on very personal levels and watched them complete amazing tasks and form relationships with the members of the Lower Ninth Ward community. Many of the long-term volunteers come from abroad, so it is really neat to see the way cultures collide and intersect between the two backgrounds. Furthermore, I was expected to handle a lot of the logistical planning when it came to big groups of short-term volunteers coming in. This was particularly interesting to me since I have been on two outreach trips to New Orleans and have sometimes been frustrated with the way organizations utilize volunteer labor. Being on the other side of that planning was really helpful for me to get a well-rounded understanding of why sometimes large groups are not necessarily helpful to such a small, localized non-profit. Construction tasks are very specific and take a good deal of training and very few construction-based tasks can handle more than a few people. Granted, it is very cool to see high-schoolers and college students feel passionate about restoring this community, but I could start to understand why there were times during outreach trips where we may have been left with not much to do. Creating assignments for volunteers includes a lot of running around. Because we are dealing with homeowners from the Lower Ninth Ward, they generally live in other areas or states since they are waiting on their homes to be rebuilt. This often makes it difficult

to get in contact with them and figure out what needs to be done with their home.

Additionally, we also have to find crew leaders who can do the specific tasks that a work site requires. It involves a lot of communication and directness, which I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to strengthen through this internship.

Something particularly special about this organization is their emphasis on making volunteer experiences personal. Lowernine.org cares deeply about making connections between volunteers and the homeowners. This is stressed through the project binders I helped create as a tool for volunteers to track their project progress, have a scope of work at hand, and also as a way to leave notes for the homeowners. It has been really rewarding to be able to look at the various notes and comments different groups of people have left for each work site, and I am excited for the day these patient homeowners can look through their finished binders and move back into their homes.

Working for lowernine.org has taught me so much in regards to being patient and being personal. Running a non-profit is not running a business, especially at lowernine.org. They put a very heavy emphasis on creating relationships with the neighborhood residents we work with, creating a positive and respectful environment for everyone involved in the rebuilding process. I have become so much more patient and understanding of situations that do not necessarily provide what a non-profit may need to get a project underway, and how to calmly look forward to alternative solutions. Deeming my time at lowernine.org as valuable would be an understatement. I feel like I've created a family with this non-profit and our partners and know that I will find myself back at this special place.