

Roland Platt: Generation Peace Academy Aids Victims of Hurricane in New Jersey

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November 6, 2012



Kimsun Barber, Grace Kellet and Alex Swenson clean out the boat house of the Ocean Church.

The costliest Atlantic hurricane in the US after Katrina, Hurricane Sandy swept through the tri-state area (NY, NJ, CT) at the end of October 2012, bringing a grislier meaning to Halloween for those whose homes were flooded and deprived of electrical power, plumbing and heat. In response to this natural disaster, first-year trainees from the Generation Peace Academy (GPA) currently enrolled in the Leadership Program volunteered to aid victims through service activities that included shoveling mud and pumping water out from homes, moving debris, and salvaging damaged furniture.

On November 3, 2012, the trainees visited three locations in New Jersey – the homes of the Nakashima and Klawitter families in Moonachie and Little Ferry, respectively, and the Ocean Church in Little Ferry, the launch site for the annual Peace King Cup Fishing Tournament. Approximately 30 volunteers were sent to the Ocean Church and a team of four was sent to each of the homes.



Megumi Homma (left) and Myoyeon Yu (right) clear out an archive room in the Ocean Church.

“When we asked the GPA participants whether they wanted to volunteer for this initiative, basically everyone wanted to help,” said Naokimi Ushiroda, director of the Leadership Program. “The main thing we are now concerned about is proper preparation. Some GPA members went out into the city earlier last week to see whether they could find people who needed help, and they did, but they didn’t have the tools to help in the right way. The main concern about this service project is that whoever’s hosting it is prepared with the right equipment, safety precautions and transportation services.”

Second-generation Unificationist Oliver Noll, the volunteer coordinator for the New Jersey church said, “It’s amazing to see our community come together from all over New York and New Jersey and extend their hands to help out their fellow brothers and sisters. We’re really grateful for that.” According to Noll, the Kopeland and Burns families were also assisted last week by volunteers from the local community. In total, approximately 30-40 families in Little Ferry and Moonachie were affected, some much worse than

others.



Ken Hunnecutt and Yuki Asanuma, who is wearing a hose used to clean the cement sidewalk, pose after a day of work outside the Ocean Church.

“We want to keep this a local community project,” said GPA and Leadership Program coordinator Keimi Kanno. “I’m working through Oliver and other volunteer coordinators in New York and New Jersey to connect families in need with willing GPA participants. Instead of cold-calling families myself to ask whether they need help, the New Jersey church is the one contacting members. That way, the local community knows that it’s their church that is caring for them and watching out for them. Hopefully this weekend we can go to the Rockaways and organize a project there with other organizations.”

The Learning Center in Manhattan (4 West 43rd Street), the dormitory for Leadership Program participants and GPA trainees, was more or less unaffected by Sandy. “We just had some rain and a bit of wind,” said Kanno. “That’s why it was important for GPA to go to people’s homes and see how families were really affected. This helped us all realize how lucky we were. At one family’s home, a part of the basement was caved in due to flooding and was filled with tree branches and mud and junk that had spilled in from outside. The whole side of building’s foundation had crumbled, and so we cleared out the basement and helped pump out mud and water and then moved furniture back in. This experience gave GPA an opportunity to give back to the local community they’ve gotten to know over the past several weeks and relate to members on a more personal level.”



Keina Ishiyama stands before a family's house across the street from the Ocean Church after clearing out their flooded and debris-filled basement.

GPA trainee Mayo Sakai said, “This was the first time I’ve seen effects of a hurricane first-hand, and I’m extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to lend a helping hand to some of those who were affected in our community. It was a memorable experience for me because I felt that each individual’s efforts during the service project bore tangible results in the end.”

“Stepping outside of my personal routine and serving the New Jersey was very rewarding,” said GPA trainee Madison Brewer, who was assigned to help clean up the Ocean Church. “Knowing my efforts directly impacted other people's lives positively uplifted my spirit. Public service is an opportunity in great abundance with much demand; however, I rarely seize it. The relief work served as a reminder of how rewarding time well spent can be. My heart goes out to all those effected by the hurricane, and I look forward to seizing any other opportunity to attend those affected by Sandy.”



Keina Ishiyama, Hitomi Agari, and Mayo Sakai shovel mud from the street that was brought by the hurricane.

In a summary of relief efforts undertaken so far in New York, Andrew Love, the Unification Church pastor in New York City, said: “Right after the storm, we sent out an email to our community asking which families had been affected. This was our initial assessment of damages. We then contacted various borough leaders to see if they had heard of any families that needed help. We then contacted the families who were affected to see if they needed physical assistance (people power). We provided lodging for a family who still don’t have gas or electricity in the 43rd street building. We provided nonperishable food and clothing boxes for collection at Sunday Service and will keep those boxes out in the lobby of 43rd street for the next couple of weeks.”

GPA’s class of 2011-2012 supported relief efforts earlier this year from February 6-13, when nearly a third of its trainees had traveled to Japan to visit local Unificationist churches and volunteer in Ishinomaki, a city heavily damaged by the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011. This year’s trainees are planning to extend their services to families in New York and New Jersey again this Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoon.