

Healing Hammers: Tuesday's Children

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"It's hot, the gnats are biting us everywhere, the work is hard, but it's really fun," smiles Juliette Candela. Juliette is part of a group of 22 teenagers spending their spring break helping build houses with Bay-Waveland Habitat for Humanity. Through the sweat and the smiles, they look just like any other energetic volunteer group on Spring Break. But there's something special about these teenagers that binds them together in a unique way, and makes this service project particularly meaningful. They're here with Tuesday's Children, an organization that reaches out to families affected by the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Each teenager in this group lost a parent or other family member during those attacks ten years ago.

Being around persons who suffered loss on 9/11 has been helpful for Juliette and the other teenagers in the program. "I don't feel self-conscious like I sometimes do around other kids," says Juliette. "We understand each other."

"They don't have to explain their story to each other," says Kathy Murphy, Director of Teen Programs for Tuesday's Children. "They bond together very quickly."

Providing opportunities for these teenagers to come together is an important part of Kathy's work. Community service projects that unite them around meaningful, productive work also help with the healing process.

"Habitat is the perfect partner organization for us," exclaims Kathy. "It's good work, and our kids feel great being able to help others. When we go back to our rooms at night, you'd think they'd be exhausted from the day's work, but they're in the hallways, laughing and talking about the fun they've had all day. I couldn't be more pleased."

Juliette is mindful of the similarities and differences between her loss and the losses suffered by Gulf Coast residents, whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. "I know it's not the same kind of loss," she acknowledges, "but when I lost my Dad I felt like my whole world was crumbling around me. I just want people here to know that they're not alone, that we're all here to help each other."

Ten years after 911, Kathy is proud of the children and families they've been able to help. But she asserts that programs like these are even more important today. "Some of the psychological and emotional needs of these families are only now becoming evident," she says. "These families need our support now more than ever."

Kathy's eyes fill with tears as she continues. As a former Wall Street employee, she lost several friends that day. "For me, it's very personal," she says gently. "Helping these kids is a way I give honor to all those who died that day. I'm very proud to be a part of this."