

Mudding and Dry-Walling

by Warren Kraft

As she was getting into that van on a warm Saturday afternoon in St. Bernard Parish, LA, my darling wife of 35 years turned back to announce, "I learned a new skill that will come in handy on your next remodeling project." What?! What remodeling project? And, has a "monster mudder" been created in just one day?

That day, 15 IMLA members, their spouses, and friends joined up with the St. Bernard Project as it helps this area continue to recover from Hurricane Katrina. Immediately after Katrina, all but two buildings in the parish were deemed uninhabitable. At the current rate of reconstruction, it will take another 16 years to replace everyone's homes in this tightly knit, family-oriented community, next door to New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. For one day, 15 of us insulated walls, hung drywall, and taped and muddied a home on Lena Street in Chalmette.

The neighborhoods are deceptively calm and well-manicured, unlike a developing subdivision where houses dot a landscape of bare ground and wild ground cover. The homes under reconstruction or fully inhabited generally appear to be of brick construction, but there are many empty grassy lots up and down the streets. On one corner, only the brick wall that marks where the home should be and separates it from the sidewalk remains standing, and about a third of the homes on this particular block remain more or less intact. Though some homes appear occupied, only once did we see any signs of life. What must have been a bustling neighborhood of family, friends, and relatives was eerily quiet.

Our work group of 15 squeezed ourselves into a passenger van, quickly becoming fast friends united for a purpose. Along with several other groups volunteering that day, we met at the St. Bernard Project headquarters for a briefing. There, we were introduced to our project managers and headed to Lena Street. Our twin tasks were to tape and mud the drywall already hung in the house, and to insulate and hang drywall in the attached garage. We learned about the homeowner's personal and family struggles, which the waters of Katrina exacerbated, if only to emphasize the premise that St. Bernard Parish is home to many who desperately seek to return and to re-establish their lives.

Personally, my drywalling skills existed some 30 years and three homes ago, but I learned how to insulate walls during post-Katrina work-trips with scouts to the Gulfport, MS, area. I was tabbed to provide the brawn for holding up sheetrock while others anchored it in place, after getting the walls insulated in the garage. In the back bedroom, I found my wife with compound in one hand and a trowel in the other, slapping the mud onto the drywall in the appropriate places. Some drywall still needed to be hung in the hallway. Others cut and measured, minimizing waste, but working with the pride that this could be their home. We finished in a concerted effort to do as much as we could. One piece of drywall short in the garage, we left with a melancholy feeling of accomplishment, married to a newfound sense of unique camaraderie and service to a person unknown, with whatever minimal skills white-collared folks had brought along. It is what we do every day, back in our home communities, without fanfare and without media. For more information about the St. Bernard Project, see http://www.stbernardproject.org. Many thanks to Carol and Ralph Karpinos for the arrangements, and to Susan Garrett, Carolyn Garrett, Alan Kesner, Deborah and Randy Van Vleck, Mark Winn, Jeanne Craig, Liz and Warren Kraft, Kim Grantham, Patrick Baker for making a mid-October Saturday in NOLA very memorable.

Warren Kraft is an Assistant City Attorney/Director of Human Resources for the City of West Bend. He serves as of counsel to the Murphy-Desmond law firm of Madison, and as an attorney for the Village of McFarland, Wisconsin. A 2006 IMLA Local Government Fellow, Warren is a commissioned lay pastor, an active Scout leader, and a substitute lifeguard at the local YMCA.



From North Carolina and Georgia to New Mexico, up to Montana and over to Wisconsin and Ontario, and back to Florida, they joined together: Susan Garrett, Carolyn Garrett, Ralph and Carol Karpinos, Alan Kesner, Deborah and Randy Van Vleck, Mark Winn, Jeanne Craig, Liz and Warren Kraft, Kim Grantham, Patrick Baker.

Liz Kraft of Oshkosh, WI, learns a new skill for her husband's next home remodeling project.





Deborah Van Vleck of Santa Fe, NM, and Susan Garrett cut the insulation for the garage



Warren Kraft of Oshkosh, WI, installs insulation in the garage.



Many hands are needed to properly hang a piece of drywall in the garage.



The human IMLA acronym; the others are still working.