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Volunteers flood Lafayette on Martin Luther King Jr. Day to help repair homes damaged by the August deluge, assist Boys & Girls Club of Acadiana

BY KAILEY BROUSSARD | Special to The Advocate

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1 of 9

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UL-Lafayette AmeriCorps members Africa White and Jonathan Carter clean the outside of a home as they and other AmeriCorps and Rebuilding Together members work Monday, January 16, 2017, to clean and repair several homes in the Derby Heights neighborhood that were damaged during flooding in August. The effort

Advocate staff photo by LESLIE WESTBROOK

Betty Sam watched Monday as volunteers painted the doors on her house and checked electrical sockets to help her return to her life before the August floods.

Some 150 volunteers, through Rebuilding Together, a nonprofit housing organization, U.S. AmeriCorps and Louisiana AmeriCorps, spent Martin Luther King Jr. Day rebuilding houses and helping with the Boys & Girls Club of Acadiana.

Sam's house on Chadwick Drive in Lafayette is one of six that were renovated — work done to honor the legacy of the civil rights leader.

“These are angels,” Sam, 61, said about the volunteers. “Who does that? I mean, Acadiana is a good place. We are friendly; we help one another, but these people are coming in from different states and they left their homes.”

Hailing from across the U.S., each AmeriCorps volunteer spends a year with a nonprofit organization. The volunteers who joined Louisiana’s AmeriCorps members will remain in the neighborhood all week to finish home renovations and to build wheelchair accessibility ramps in the Derby Heights neighborhood.

Sarah Prusik, a member of Metro Chicago’s AmeriCorps, spent most of her day building a ramp for a homeowner’s shed.

“To have the opportunity to all come together again and just sort of embrace the spirit of volunteerism on Martin Luther King Day is especially what you want out of AmeriCorps,” Prusik said.

A week prior to the day of service, Sam, a paralegal in the District Attorney’s Office in Lafayette, had moved back into the home she has lived in for the past 14 years. Sam said her house had to be gutted. Mold formed under a tile in her living room, and spores had begun to spread across the walls.

“Every time I would come here, I would get sick,” she said. “I had allergy problems, skin rashes and nasal problems.”

She said previous organizations had come to help the neighborhood, but they could not help in the first few months following the floodwaters that ravaged south Louisiana.

Sam said the night before the volunteers began repairing her house, she was unable to sleep from excitement.

“I felt like a little child before Christmas,” she said. “When I saw all of these people, I said, ‘God, look how big you are! You love me!’”

On Monday, volunteers in light gray-and-white shirts walked up and down the streets picking up trash and hauling equipment to the individual houses. Volunteers at Sam’s house also replaced door knobs inside her home and replaced her sink.

“We’re doing the final mile of stuff to make sure that they are in their home and it’s up to what it used to be before,” said Valerie Benson, an AmeriCorps program coordinator helping with a house down the street.

Near the end of the service day, Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser visited the homeowners and the volunteers.

“When (people) see volunteers from all over the country giving time away from their entire family here to help people they don’t even know, it lifts the whole community up,” he said.

Sam said the neighborhood has begun to heal, and foot traffic as well as a sense of community has returned.

“I thought I was humbled before, and now I’m very much humbled,” she said. “Anything that happens is a blessing, and I’m grateful.”

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