

Amber Alberta  
JJCF Final Report

Over the past year I have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to serve a very high-needs community that otherwise would not have been served. I assisted Camp ACE (Alert Community Empowerment) is a small, grassroots non-profit group in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans, an area that is still greatly struggling as a result of Hurricane Katrina. The emotional, mental and physical needs of this community are extremely high, yet have remained unmet over the past five years as a result of economic disparity. Many local non-profit groups now have even less ability to deliver adequate services to their constituents than they did pre-Katrina. Camp ACE was especially hard-hit, losing much of its funding and staffing. Its programs to help low-income families, children, teen mothers and HIV/AIDS survivors to improve their lives and better cope with their conditions have been sharply curtailed.

I began my time with Camp ACE by working with their Counseling and Tutorial program, working at a local middle school with at-risk youth who were in danger of entering the juvenile justice system. Throughout my time working with Camp ACE, I assisted the HIV Outreach program, administering HIV testing and conducting street outreach and prevention education in the community.

The Camp ACE Education building was hit extremely hard during the storm and only patchwork repairs had been made due to the lack of funds. When I arrived in New Orleans, the building had not been used for a year. I was lucky enough to receive additional grant funds that went directly to Camp ACE. We repaired a hole in the roof of the education building and made several other repairs in order to re-open the building and provide critical educational services to the community. During the summer of 2010, we were also able to use these funds to run a summer enrichment program for at-risk children and youth in the community. The kids that attended this much-needed program came from very economically disadvantaged families who could not otherwise afford this type of summer enrichment for their children. Luckily, we were able to provide scholarships for all children, as well as two meals a day and academic enrichment to ensure these children continued to learn during the summer months.

In the fall, with all funds exhausted, I was forced to get creative with how I could continue to provide these types of critical services to the community at very low cost. One of many social problems in the community that really struck me was the number of teenagers and adults who did not have a high school diploma. This, of course, leads to extreme difficulty finding decent paying jobs and, for at-risk youth, often leads to desperate situations and criminal activity, contributing largely to the high rates of juvenile incarceration that we see in this state and others. I realized that with few resources, I could develop and teach an Adult Literacy/ GED class to help members of my community work towards brighter futures. I conducted outreach to gain students for my program by attending community gatherings and distributing fliers and information. I ended up with a small class of students who were all single mothers, and all with hopes of creating a stronger, more economically sound life for themselves and their children through education.

To my dismay, my work at Camp ACE came to an end when the physical state of

the education building was no longer sound or adequate to run programs in. I found a job at a local elementary school, working in the special education department, assisting children with severe mental disabilities. I very much enjoy this role because it allows me to continue to provide much needed services to low-income children. Next year, I plan to stay in New Orleans and continue to serve this demographic by becoming a special education teacher and a high needs school. I continue to look to the future for Camp ACE, as I assist a group of volunteers from Love Knows No Bounds (a non-profit group Ithaca, NY) with a vision to create a sustainable-built community center in the Seventh Ward.

I feel that I have accomplished a great deal through my volunteer work in a community that has extreme need for such assistance. I could not have done any of this without the help of JJCF, and for that I am extremely grateful. The ten months I spent as a JJCF fellow and a Camp ACE volunteer have enabled me to far better serve the low-income, high needs communities with which I will continue to serve.