



FRONT: NATALIA FISHER MIDDLE: MARGOT MACK, SUZANNE HUNTON, MELISSA MACK  
 REAR: MELISSA VALLO, LORÉN DENICOLA, BARBARA GRANT

# HOUSE OF THE BOILING SUN

BY KEVIN CROOK

They were baking in the sun. Dressed in boots and long sleeves, they wiped away sweat as they scraped paint off the side of a grand old house in New Orleans. It was exhausting, body-aching work. Some had to stand atop wobbly 10-foot ladders, removing debris from a gutter. Others skinned their knuckles priming stucco. It was hard labor, all day, on a job that was not going to be completed anytime soon, and in the wrong clothes to boot.

Why did they do it?

"Because it was fun," says Natalia Fisher, a teacher at West Side Montessori School.

As part of its annual conference, which this year was held in late February in New Orleans, the American Montessori Society offered a Day of Service to its par-



ticipants: an opportunity to work on homes hard hit by Katrina, repainting and protecting water-damaged sides. Natalia was one in a group of nine WSMS staffers who worked all day on two separate water-damaged homes.

"It was seven of us working on this huge old house," explains Natalia. "Two of us, An and Jeca, were at another (house) farther away."

The others in Natalia's crew included Melissa Mack, Melissa Vallo, Lorén DeNicola, Suzanne Hunton, Margot Mack, and Barbara Grant—each one of them assigned to various areas of the enormous house.

"I worked on a wrought iron fence, scraping off old, flaky, rusted paint,"

says Melissa Vallo, head teacher of 2Wam. "It was very, very hard work."

Suzanne Hunton, head teacher of 3W, scraped and painted 6-foot-tall shutters that ran around the house. "There were 30 of 'em," says Suzanne. She makes a sly grin. "It was very labor intensive."

Many in Natalia's group cite low morale at the beginning of the day. The large house was a daunting project to tackle, they had been asked to wear long-sleeved clothing and boots but quickly saw that the day was going to be a hot one, and then came the kicker: their house had not been directly affected by Katrina, but was actually part of a larger restoration project that was in conjunction with a local church.

"I was mad," says Barbara Grant. "I thought we were going to be down in the 9th ward, helping out." But like the others in her group, Barbara soon realized this ultimately did not diminish the significance of the task at hand—there was a family in need. "When we talked to the owner of the house, she was really humbled by the work we were doing—she was so overwhelmed. That felt good."

Even when the reality of the volunteering assignment clashed with their expectations, everyone in the WSMS group agreed that the work was hard but worth doing, and even entertaining.

"Honestly, we're New Yorkers," says Margot Mack. "Many of us have lived here long enough to not have manual labor skills at hand. So just watching New Yorkers out of their element was funny." She laughs. "Watching Natalia paint was hysterically funny." Then she adds, "But we got it done, and that was a satisfying feeling."

"It was funny to hear everyone griping," says Natalia, "but there was humor to it. It's fun, you're making something beautiful."

An Anglo, a teacher in 2Wpm, put her spin on the work she did with Jeca Rodriguez-Colón on the other house, whose owner had not yet returned to New Orleans.

"I kind of feel like I contributed in whatever little way that I can in helping build a house of a stranger or a person that I didn't even know, in a house of a stranger that might not even come back," says An. "For me that is humbling and, emotionally, it's sort of an awakening. You read in the papers about disasters and calamities, but reading it you're just a passive reader. But going to the place and experiencing it, it is real."

The WSMS crew all agreed that they would do the work again, because at the end of the day, as tired and sweaty as they were, the work was satisfying to the spirit.

"It's going to sound cheesy," says Natalia, grinning, "but there's a house out in New Orleans that I helped make beautiful."