On Campus

Easing the Big Easy

Spring 2006

Mark Weiner is a typical young college grad in some ways: earnest and ambitious, with a cell phone that never stops ringing. But rather than punching in and out of a Manhattan office, Weiner ’04CC spends his days ducking in and out of tents in a muddy parking lot. One tent is his home, another his office. Both are in St. Bernard Parish, a poor New Orleans suburb devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

Weiner is founder and executive director of Emergency Communities, a nonprofit serving hot meals to more than 1400 storm victims and relief workers every day under a large, domed tent next to an abandoned off-track betting parlor. The organization’s 80 full-time volunteers also distribute free groceries, household goods, clothing, and toys to residents who live in nearby trailers provided by the government. There are separate tents for haircuts, Internet access, a play area for children, and acupuncture and massages from licensed volunteers. Local bands perform several nights a week, drawing residents and volunteers onto a makeshift dance floor.

“We try to create a safe and warm community space,” says Weiner. “Everything nearby was destroyed by the storm, so there’s nowhere to shop, nowhere to go out. People don’t come here just to get a Styrofoam container of food. There’s life here.”

Weiner’s life was in New York City when Katrina hit. He had a job as a paralegal at a midtown firm and was applying to law schools. But in early September, he quit his job, shelved his school plans, and traveled to Waveland, Mississippi, to volunteer at a relief kitchen. He launched Emergency Communities in December with a half-dozen friends, none of whom had serious business or nonprofit experience.

Weiner, a friendly and upbeat Chicago native, says he learned most of what he knows about management reading Nonprofits for Dummies and has had little time to avail himself of professional advice. He spends the bulk of his time applying for grants and raising funds, with the goal that Emergency Communities soon will purchase all its food from local farmers and grocers and thereby support the local

economy, rather than relying on donations. He received a $135,000 grant from United Way in early February for that purpose. Meanwhile, federal officials have asked Emergency Communities to brace for a sharp increase in demand as large numbers of area residents begin returning this spring,Weiner says, partly as a result of the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s ending its temporary housing for victims in hotels and on cruise ships.

“It’s amazing how much need there still is around here,” he says. “It’s as if the storm just happened — the streets are filled with debris and garbage and wrecked cars, and the houses dilapidated. I can’t imagine going to law school, for the time being. I can’t imagine doing anything else but this.”



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >