On Campus

Columbia Students Rally for Sandy Relief

Winter 2012-13



Members of Alpha Epsilon Pi and Columbia/Barnard Hillel surveying storm damage on Rockaway Beach.

They piled into rental vans and drove to Coney Island in Brooklyn. They borrowed cars from parents and went to the Rockaways in Queens, to Staten Island, to Long Beach, and to the New Jersey shore. They arrived with boxes of food, clothing, blankets, shoes, baby formula, medicine, toys, flashlights, batteries, toiletries, and cleaning supplies.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, students from across the University joined in relief efforts or organized their own.

Claire Kiefer, a student at the School of Nursing, led twenty of her classmates to Belle Harbor, Queens, where the group spent several days shoveling sand away from houses and cars, cleaning out flooded basements and garages, and tearing up ruined floorboards.

“As nursing students, we strive to improve the lives of all people,” said Kiefer. On this occasion, “we tried to make a difference for people whose lives were affected close to home.”

Some students put their schooling to direct use.

Rob van Haaren and Garrett Fitzgerald, doctoral candidates in earth and environmental engineering, adapted a solar-panel system they had originally designed for charging electric cars to instead generate electricity at a church in Rockaway Beach that was serving as a distribution point for donated goods. For several weeks, their 1,200-square-foot solar array was laid out in the church’s backyard, powering lights, refrigerators, computers, and cell phones.

“The panels were just sitting in New Jersey not being used,” van Haaren says. “So why not put them to work?”

Chloe Svolakos, a student at the School of Social Work, created a Facebook page showing where people could drop off food and clothing donations in and around New York City. “The idea was to act as a liaison for people who were prepared to donate but uninformed about the logistics,” Svolakos says. “I located donation sites near my friends’ homes, and then encouraged them to post pictures of donation boxes to share with others who live in these areas.” She has since founded a nonprofit, Threads, that has helped to repair the homes of eight Coney Island families.

“I was proud to see that so many of our students were quick to respond and pulled together as a community to support one another and those in need,” says Kevin G. Shollenberger, dean of student affairs for the College and Columbia Engineering.



Guide to school abbreviations