

21W.745: Advanced Essay Workshop
MIT Student

Remembering Bogalusa

It has only been three days since I left Bogalusa, Louisiana, but I'm already afraid that I've begun to forget. Afraid that the memories will slowly fade away into the dark recesses of my mind, or wherever it is that lost memories go. I cling to the pictures; I look at them over and over again; I memorize the cherished images, and then play the slideshow in my mind. It is a feeble attempt at reliving the past, I know, but it is my attempt to remember.

Here is my favorite picture. Five people stand in a row—Michael, Nina, Elli, Leah, Miss Eva—garbed in matching brightly colored tee-shirts bearing the words “Team Awesome, Bogalusa, LA.” I spent a week in Bogalusa in March 2008 with a group of students from MIT, aiding in Hurricane Katrina Relief, and here, in a few million pixelated dots, a four by six inch rectangle, two thousand kilobytes of memory, was captured a week's worth of memories.

Our group of four college students is standing with Miss Eva in her new Habitat for Humanity house, admiring the fruits of five days of hard work: a completed tile floor. Installing a tile floor is tricky, as I learned. The tiles have to be the right size, the right orientation, glossy-side-up, alternating grains with neighboring pieces, no cracks, laid smoothly. This can be particularly difficult when it comes time to cut the corner pieces, shaped like slightly lopsided “u's” with not-quite-square-corners. Once I labored for half-an-hour with ruler, pencil, tile, and exacto-knife, making measurements and cuts so precise that they would have made my middle school woodshop teacher proud, only to find that I had cut the piece such that the grains were

facing the wrong way. I wanted to put the piece in anyways, it was the closet piece, nobody would notice if the grains were going the wrong way. But instead, I took the time to measure and cut again, no short-cuts, because Miss Eva deserves the best, and because the building of her house deserves just as much care and attention as the building of my house or your house. The floor didn't turn out perfect, not by any means, but although the floor may not be *the* best, it was certainly *our* best.

And now Miss Eva's house has a floor. It also has cabinets and ceiling fans and light switches. As I hugged Miss Eva good-bye on Friday afternoon, thoughts scrambled through my mind, wonderings, hopes, and fears. Wonderings about when and if they will ever finish Miss Eva's house. Hopes that someday Miss Eva will walk across her tile floor, that she will look down at a slightly crooked tile and think of us, that she will remember the engravings underneath the last tile we laid, *To Miss Eva, We're Team Awesome, not Team Perfect, Elli, Leah, Nina, Michael*. But stronger than the wonderings and the hopes were the fears. Fears that Miss Eva won't remember. More importantly, fears that I won't remember, or that I won't care to remember. Fears that I will return to a life of classes and problem sets at MIT, a life of focused determination to do well for medical school, a life trapped within the intellectual bubble of academia. Certainly I'll always have a vague recollection of my trip to Bogalusa, certainly I'll remember that I helped put in the tile floor of Miss Eva's house. But will I remember the melodies of Miss Eva's voice, the warmth of her hug, the sparkle in her eyes? Will I remember how intensely I hoped to someday say, *Miss Eva, here is the house you've waited two and a half years for?*

Two and a half years ago, newspapers overflowed with images of the devastation left behind by Hurricane Katrina. Talk of the strongest hurricane in years dominated dinner conversations; elementary school children held bake sales and college students held benefit dinners to raise money for those who had been displaced. Thousands of people flocked to New Orleans to help rebuild. The media flourished under images of FEMA trailers and uprooted trees.

The images have since disappeared, the hurricane fading slowly from America's memory. But the need for help in the gulf area is stronger than ever.

Miss Eva currently lives under a plastic tarp roof, a makeshift shelter after Katrina tore through the shingles of her house, leaving behind nothing but debris where a roof once stood. A quick tour of Bogalusa reveals many similarly-patched-up houses, many uprooted trees, many FEMA trailers in tiny yards, the city's residents too poor to live anywhere else, lacking the resources to do anything about their circumstances.

Bogalusa is poor, poor beyond my comprehension, beyond what I know as a citizen of well-educated upper-middle-class America. The city is situated an hour and a half outside New Orleans, on the Louisiana-Mississippi border, and is in the second poorest parish in the poorest state in our country. Its economy is centered on a paper mill, a large black steel fortress that could easily provide the setting for any horror movie. Clouds of black smoke billow from the mill's multiple smokestacks, enveloping the city in toxic, odorous fumes that have led to a rise in cancer incidences and a decline in life expectancy. Cancer Alley, they call it. During my first day at Miss Eva's house, a deep, pungent odor wafted across my nose, an odor that I thought was emanating from the port-a-potty I was standing next to. I moved away. The odor grew stronger. I made a face, and told somebody I thought the port-a-potty should be emptied. Nina, that's the

smell of the paper mill. Miss Eva tells me that she gets used to the smell, that she accepts the risks, that she's thankful for the revenue generated by the paper mill, thankful for what she has. Bogalusa's residents do not complain about the one opportunity they are given.

A few grocery stores line Bogalusa's city center, interspersed between dilapidated gas stations with boarded up windows, like a scene from an old western movie, I thought. A small rectangular building, no larger than the apartment I live in at MIT, boasts the sign "Cinema." I was later told that the Cinema had reclining chairs, not because they were installed that way, but because the chairs there were so old and creaky that they had begun to tilt backwards. So different from the ten-screen movie theaters I'm used to, with surround sound, gigantic screens, and chairs with so many fancy features that an instruction pamphlet would be needed to figure them all out. I couldn't believe that I was still in America. Where was the America that I knew of, the one that prided itself on being the Land of Opportunity, the wealthiest nation in the world, with equal chances for all?

Because America, it seemed, had forgotten about Bogalusa. When we come from privileged backgrounds, it is easy to forget about the hundreds of thousands of Americans who live below the poverty line, easy to forget that some people in this country do not have access to computers, or cars, or college educations. It's easy to long instead for all the material things that we do not have: a designer wardrobe, a beach house in Florida, a McMansion.

My week in Bogalusa exposed me to the realities I had long neglected to acknowledge. It showed me the destitution of America's poor, impassioned me about affordable housing, and taught me that there is room for change, change that could be brought about by just a little effort on my part. My only hope now is that I will remember the socioeconomic disparities within the

United States, that I will remember to never be complacent with what I have, because there are too many people with nothing at all.

Many of my photographs from Bogalusa were taken inside churches. In one, I sit with a group of seven MIT students inside a black Baptist church, the Greater Ebenezer Baptist church, an island of white amidst a sea of black faces. My mouth is open in song; I must be stumbling through a hymn I did not know the words to; my arms are above my head, waving, and I am certain I must be swaying with the rhythmic voices of those around me, the voices of those who did know the words, and who sang loudly and bravely and beautifully. At the time, I felt like an intruder.

Bogalusa is still very much racially segregated; the whites congregate in the wealthier west side, the blacks in the poorer east side. Whites and blacks go to separate churches, and scarcely interact. During our stay, our group of MIT students were housed in the Westside Emmanuel Baptist Church, a white Baptist church with a very charismatic and forward-looking pastor. Pastor Marcus has made it his personal goal to integrate Bogalusa, and, as a first step, has reached out to the black congregation at Greater Ebenezer. He became the first white pastor to give a sermon there, and he has returned regularly to attend service.

One evening, Pastor Marcus asked us if we wanted to experience a traditional southern black Baptist service. I was immediately intrigued, and envisioned in my mind something akin to Whoopi Goldberg's antics in *Sister Act*. Stereotypes of black Baptist churches pervade popular culture—the gospel singing, the passionate sermons, the many interjections of “Amen” and “Yes Lord.” I was curious, and my curiosity brought me to that pew in Greater Ebenezer. But as I sat there, I felt a pang of guilt; here I was gawking at a group of people as if they were some tourist

attraction, a display case for wealthy students from the north. I was ashamed of my motivations for coming to Greater Ebenezer; for I was there not to pay my respects, but for my own amusement, for the purely selfish motivations of “experiencing” the south.

Shame burned within me even more when I discovered how selfless the congregation was, how grateful they were that we cared enough about them to attend their service. Their pastor introduced us, telling of how we came down to Bogalusa to volunteer. He asked for seven volunteers to give us each a hug; we were immediately swarmed by a small crowd, who hugged us and held our hands and patted our shoulders. I received more hugs at the Greater Ebenezer than I have in my four years at MIT, and these were hugs from strangers, who did not know me, who only knew that I had traveled to their home to volunteer, and who loved me for it. I could feel the tears welling up inside me; tears for my own selfishness, tears of hope for the people in Bogalusa, tears for their gratitude, tears for the privilege I have so long enjoyed, but never understood.

As I traveled to the Greater Ebenezer Baptist Church, and to the many other churches in the area, I discovered that religious faith is a big part of life in Bogalusa. I participated in prayers and services out of respect, but it took me a week to truly understand just how important religion is. I grew up without religion. My parents were raised during the Cultural Revolution in China, during which anything religious was banned. I also grew up with the understanding that I can achieve anything with hard work and determination. I grew up with a firm belief in meritocracy. I saw my parents live the American Dream, transforming a few hundred dollars into a house, a college education for me, a life in middle class America. I know that the opportunities exist, and I know that so many roads lie beneath my feet, just waiting for me to take the first step. I have the chance to mold my life into whatever form I wish it to take. But what if I, like the residents

of Bogalusa, did not have these opportunities? The people in Bogalusa do not know of a life beyond the paper mill. When I asked Miss Eva what there is to do in New Orleans, she merely shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t really go to New Orleans.” To live your life in Bogalusa, to rarely leave, never to see what there is beyond the city borders. It is something I cannot imagine. And that is why Miss Eva, and others like her, have so much faith. It is their hope for a better a life; and it is the only hope they know of.

Even in their poverty, though, the residents of Bogalusa opened up their hearts and homes to us while we were there. Every evening, local churches provided us with dinner—spaghetti and fried chicken and strawberry shortcake and sweet tea—the food seemingly more delicious than anything I had ever eaten, perhaps because it was cooked with such heartfelt thanks. Miss Eva came and built alongside us every single day of the week. One day, she brought us a large bag of Mardi gras beads. I could tell she had wanted to give us something, a token of appreciation, and that this was all she had to give. The people in Bogalusa prayed for us, and hugged us, and showered us with more appreciation and generosity than words can describe. They showed us that there is so much more to life than books and problem sets and resumes. How is it that those who have the least are the ones who give the most?

Miss Eva, Pastor Marcus, the congregation of the Greater Ebenezer Baptist Church, and all the other people I met in Bogalusa taught me more lessons than any Nobel-prize winning professor at MIT ever will. They taught me what it means to live and to love and to embrace what I have. They reminded me that a whole lifetime of opportunities exist outside my little bubble at MIT, just waiting to be explored, just waiting for me to leave it a little better than I found it.

I have much hope for Bogalusa, and for Bogalusa's future. But my hope rests in the hope that the fourteen MIT students who were there always remember the hearts and homes that were opened to us. That we'll keep in touch with Miss Eva and Pastor Marcus; that we will write and communicate and open up dialogue about our experiences; that, as we become engineers and doctors and businessmen, upper-middle-class citizens of America, we always remember what is meaningful. As we packed up our suitcases on the last night of our stay in Bogalusa, Pastor Marcus asked us, "Do you know what the most important part of your tombstone is? It's not your name. It's not the day you were born or the day you died. It's the dash in between. That dash represents your entire life." I hope we all remember to live our lives well.

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