

Students Help With Cleanup After Hurricane Helene

BY ALLISON GRUNDY

Nearly 400 of Southern Adventist University's 3,229 enrolled students hail from the Carolinas and Georgia, some of the states hit hardest by Hurricane Helene, and many more have family and friends who live in areas that were flooded or damaged.

Even before the Category 4 storm struck the coast of Florida and moved inland, killing upwards of 300 people, the University's Disaster Response Program coordinators — Laura Racovita, Ph.D., dean of the School of Social Work, and Cheryl Craven, director of Christian Service — began recruiting volunteers and coordinating with partner organization 2Serve to move into areas of need as soon as routes were cleared. Processes to excuse students from classes were pre-approved, allowing Southern to deploy help more speedily as a result.

The first of three groups of students from Southern Adventist University, joined by employees and family members, left campus October 2, 2024, to quickly respond to the devastation in North Carolina in the wake of Helene.

Hosted by Fletcher Church in Hendersonville, North Carolina, the first group included 44 volunteers who stopped along the way to pick up supplies ranging from bottled water to baby food. Once on the ground, the Southern crew helped run points of distribution, clear debris, tarp roofs, and remove drywall and flooring as well as mud in flooded homes of local residents.

In a message to Ken Shaw, Ed.D., Southern Adventist University president, Chris Carey, Fletcher Academy



Students help remove damaged baseboards and drywall from a home in Fletcher, North Carolina.



Removing damaged flooring was one way the students assisted homeowners.

president and CEO, noted volunteers' "enthusiasm and dedication were evident from the moment they arrived, ready to make a difference."

Despite nights spent in sleeping bags on the floor of the church's fellowship hall, nothing dampened the courage and willingness of those who chose to live out the University's mission statement to "pursue Spirit-filled lives of service."

When the second trip was canceled due to infrastructure challenges at the base site, many students were quick to ask if there was space to join an alternate group instead. Four students and one professor spent the weekend of Oc-

tober 5 assisting in cleanup efforts, and then a third group joined the work on October 8, with 20 more volunteers who were ready to model the hands and feet of Jesus.

One student from North Carolina, Mason Harmon, senior marketing major, described the trip as unlike anything he had ever experienced before. "Witnessing so much destruction and seeing people's entire livelihoods and communities completely devastated was such a sobering reality. I definitely feel that my assistance in the cleanup efforts made a positive impact, but due to the magnitude of the situation, I wish that I could have done more."

Harmon also shared how the response holds personal significance for him. "I'm beyond grateful for Southern's willingness to serve in my home state, and proud of my University family for stepping up to support the communities of western North Carolina."

In addition to coordinating recruiting and trip logistics, Racovita also oversees pre-deployment orientations and post-service debriefings. Students have reported being "enriched by these missions where even the smallest things had a big impact, not only on the people they served but also on themselves." Campus volunteers with servant hearts will continue to explore ways to help rebuild damaged communities, especially those so close to home. 📍

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