

Leah Kellog, from Olalla, describes her experiences in Mississippi, Alabama and Texas

Community service comes naturally to Leah Kellog. She was born in Olalla, a small town in Kitsap County where she has lived all her life. Her dad runs the community center, and Leah has been active in community events such as the Olalla Bluegrass Festival and community theater in Gig Harbor.

“I’m devoted to theater,” she said. “I try to make it part of my life, without doing the movie star stuff.”

Leah was working as an elementary-school tutor last fall, when, through a teacher at the school, she learned of the Washington Conservation Corps.

“I looked it up on the Internet, and as soon as I saw the site, I was hooked,” she said. “I knew instantly I wanted to join.”

Last Oct. 21, three weeks after joining WCC, Leah and her crew shipped out to the Gulf Coast to help with debris removal and tarping roofs. They arrived in Mobile, Ala., and traveled to Pascagoula, Miss., Deweyville, Texas, and everywhere in between to help with the cleanup. They were unprepared for what they found when they arrived.

“Everything on that route from Alabama to Texas, from the shore to 20 miles inland, was gone,” she said. “I couldn’t believe there could be such ultimate destruction here in America. It was like going to a third world country.”

The smell of rot was everywhere in Mississippi.

“It was weird to smell it, to see it, to walk on it,” she said. “Biloxi is a big town, and there were no structures left – they were only shells. People were living in tents. You could see the destruction.”

Pass Christian, Miss. – near where Katrina made landfall – was utterly destroyed. “There was nothing left, no one there,” she said. “It was, by far, more terrible, but it didn’t affect me as much because there was just nothing left to see.”

With the exception of Pass Christian, where there was nothing left, rescue teams marked each building with an “X” as they searched for people.

“Those were so hard to see,” Leah said. “Each X had four numbers in it, showing the date it was searched, the number of dead they found, the number of survivors and the number missing. Every time we came to one of those, conversation just stopped dead.”

When Leah learned of an opening on one of the cruise ships acting as a temporary shelter in Mobile, Ala., she volunteered for ship board duty. There were approximately 1,500 to 1,800 people on board, including residents, staff and volunteers. Leah was assigned to help run the teen center, set up exclusively for kids from ages 13 to 17.

“We tried to give them a place where they could be themselves, away from adults,” she said. “We wouldn’t let anyone else in, no exceptions. Not FEMA, not the ship staff, not the parents, no one. But it kind of broke your heart to turn the little kids away.”

After 30 days, most of the volunteers returned home, leaving Leah as one of the most senior people on board. “People would stop me 24 hours a day to ask for help,” she said. “Even FEMA called me day and night about everything. I learned a lot about myself and what I’m capable of.”

Toward the end of her duty, Leah was sent to Texas to reunite with her crew for debris removal. She kept a journal of her trip, filled with memories, like her description of the 80-year-old woman and the look of gratitude on her face when the crew cleaned the debris from her yard. Or of the mother who cried because she couldn’t fix her kids’ dinner. Or of the family praying around a dinner table that didn’t belong to them. Or of people doing laundry in their driveways because their houses were gone. And the lady who had lost everything, but came to the shelter every day to play the piano, because that was the only thing she could hold on to.

“I was reborn by this experience,” said Leah. “Completely and utterly changed. I found patience, listening skills and empathy. I learned that I’m capable of many different kinds of hard work. And that laughter saves everything.”