

Peter Dieser, Mount Vernon, describes his experiences in Texas and New Orleans

From the start, Washington Conservation Corps member Peter Dieser literally had to hit the ground running. A phone interview with Ecology on a Wednesday turned into a job offer that Friday, and Peter was asked if he could start working the next Monday.

In little more than a weekend, Peter went from managing a marina in Lake Minnetonka, Minn., to working for the WCC in Mount Vernon, Wash. He arrived just after the rest of his Mount Vernon crew was sent to the Gulf Coast to help with Hurricane Katrina relief, so he worked several weeks with a WCC crew from Bellingham before leaving to the Gulf Coast.

Last Nov. 20, he was called to undertake response and relief work near Deweyville, Texas, close to the border with Louisiana. Hurricane Rita had just ravaged the area, generating nearly 30 tornadoes, which twisted or flattened every tree for miles.

“It was hard to witness. We moved debris off houses so people could just get out their front door,” Peter said. “In many ways the entire experience was surreal.”

For nearly a month, Peter’s crew worked at least 11 hours a day, resting only on Sundays. At first, the WCC crews intended to cut and remove trees and tarp roofs for the area’s elderly and those with special needs. However, it was soon apparent that everyone in Newton and Orange counties needed help. For most storm survivors, Peter’s crew was the first government entity to arrive on the scene.

Most of the time in Texas, Peter and his WCC crewmates stayed in the Deweyville First Baptist Church. Residents were grateful for the team’s help and assistance and often prepared hot meals for the 30 or so WCC members.

Although he works out regularly, Peter says at first, he wasn’t sure that he could stay up with the grueling physical demands of removing dozens of trees a day.

“The first couple of days, my feet and hands were just incredibly sore,” he said. “By the end, though, my body had acclimated to the work. The people on my crew were great. We all pitched in and did our job. I’m proud of that.”

During his deployment to the South, Peter also got a firsthand glimpse of New Orleans. He visited the city’s Ninth Ward that bore the brunt of the flooding when the levees failed during Hurricane Katrina.

What still awes him is that although Rita severely damaged east Texas, “the infrastructure was still

there. People were living in the homes where we cut down and removed trees. New Orleans is still years away from recovery. In the Ninth Ward, 99 percent of the houses were flooded. There was so much damage – it's hard to know where to start.”

On Feb. 8, Peter and Ecology WCC supervisor Rob Spath went to Washington, D.C., to provide testimony before a joint legislative hearing about AmeriCorps' members' experiences providing relief work for the 2005 hurricanes.

Before he left, Peter said he was honored to have been nominated by his WCC peers to speak on everyone's behalf before Congress.

“I'm not nervous about speaking publicly,” Peter said. “I just want to be sure that I do the best job I can talking about everyone's experiences.”

Peter said he wants to return to the Gulf to help build houses through the Habitat for Humanity program.

What about life after WCC? Peter, who earned his Bachelor's Degree in English at the University of Minnesota, said his goal is to teach. He intends to take the scholarship he is earning working with the WCC and get a Master's in literature. But next summer, Peter has great opportunity being a “shovel bum” for a friend who is doing archeology work at Pompeii in Italy.