The Eye of the Storm

When most people hear the word “hurricane,” the first thing they think of is either Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Sandy; as for the residents of Lumberton, North Carolina, they think of Hurricane Matthew.

Lumberton, NC is a small town in Robeson County, one of the most diverse in the state, but most interestingly one of the homes of the Lumbee Tribe, the fourth largest Native American Tribe in the nation. Lumberton, however, was also not very financially privileged before the events that occurred between September 28th and October 18th, 2016, with a third of its population beneath the poverty line. To protect the big corporations in town that were stimulating the economy of the town from flooding, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a dike. This would come back to bite them in the rear, since it ran alongside the Lumber River.

On September 28th, 2016, a series of storms hit several counties in North Carolina. Robeson County was one of them, and the Lumber River rose around six feet so that it was about 2.5 feet above the flood stage level. This excess water did no damage to afore mentioned businesses, but a lot of this water was pushed off onto the households and organizations of the town, such as a one of the local churches. Only minimal damage was suffered.

By the time that Hurricane Matthew hit Lumberton on October 8th, 2016, the Lumber River had only sunk back down to a height of 13 feet, exactly at the level for flood stage. By the time Hurricane Matthew finished throwing its tantrum three days later, the River had risen to the height of 22 feet. To put that into perspective, Interstate 95 ran right along a section of the Lumber River, elevated upon a hill. The water level was above that. Destruction was inevitable. However, death was not. The initial casualty number was a miraculous 4. However, as weeks drawn on after the Hurricane, there was at least one death a day due to dehydration, starvation, sickness, depression, or several of the mentioned causes.

Part of what made the Hurricane so devastating for Lumberton was the fact that disaster assistance organizations did not do all that much to assist thanks to the policies that are in effect in this country. The lack of money in the community did not help this either. Thus, Lumberton needed assistance from outsiders when it was time for my spring break.

I attend Towson University and am involved with a multi-denominational Christian dinner group that meets every Tuesday night called The Table. Our Campus Minister for the group is Pastor Laura Sinche, a member of the Lutheran Diocese of Maryland. I initially heard about the opportunity to spend my Spring Break in Lumberton from her. I had decided to go to pursue my faith, make memories, and get service hours for my co-ed service fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega. We left campus on Friday, March 17th, 2017 to meet up at College Park with students from University of Maryland and UMBC who also heard about this trip through their Campus Ministry. From Towson, we had 7, from UMBC, 3, and from College Park, 9, for a grand total of 19.

We started driving that day and didn’t arrive in Robeson County until the following day. We were staying in an old parsonage for the entirety of the week, and there were no beds to sleep on, so we had to figure out what we were doing for sleep before the trip.

Since we had time to burn, we decided to attend a local pow-wow at the University of North Carolina Pembroke (UNCP). This was the first exposure that we had to Lumbee culture and tradition. Their outfits were different for each style of dance, and no outfit was the same as another. They were all made by hand with all sorts of different colors: Feathers of black, beads of purple, sashes of orange, bangles of silver, and so forth.

Before I mention anything else about the Lumbee Tribe, it is absolutely essential for me to say that while we were there, it did not feel like we were the outsiders; if anything, we were students, and they were eager teachers. We could see this within some of the dances, in which one or more of the dancers was not what society would racially call a Native American.

From the beginning, their dancing was mesmerizing, the entire bodies of the dancers swaying rhythmically in time with the pounding percussions of the drums that the singers sat around. Each dance seemed to tell a story, and as we would find out Monday night, they did.

After cooking dinner that night, we were going to meet the contact that our Pastor had talked with about this trip at a campfire, but because of the rain that night, it was canceled, and we instead spent the night at a local roller skating rink. Have you ever seen a group of ten or more young adults get completely out-skated by kids that could have been half their age? Because that was essentially the case that night with most our group, and I have to say that it was hilarious.

The next morning, we attended church at St. Mark’s, a Lutheran Church that was mainly Lumbee. Because their Pastor had recently left their church, Pastor Laura conducted the service while Pastor Ray Ranker, the Lutheran Campus Minister at College Park, gave sermon. Afterwards, we had a potluck brunch that was hosted by the body of the church and again experienced hospitality that you read about in Southern Culture books. They asked us all about our education, where we studied, our majors, what we thought of class, and more. The food that they brought also matched the stereotype of Southern Culture.

After the brunch, we finally met our contact, Mac Legerton, who, in addition to being Lumbee and a Reverend, is heavily involved within the social change movement in Lumberton. It is worth noting that that was maybe the third or fourth time Pastor Laura had managed to contact Mac after countless attempts before the trip, and as a result, we had the running joke that Mac was just Pastor Laura with a mustache on. If you ever had the pleasure of meeting Wes Wobbenhurst, then you have an idea of the kind of presence that Mac had. He was very calming and spiritual, and almost seemed to draw us in. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve said he was a ghost. We then proceeded to tour around the town to see just how bad the damage was while Mac told us about the area.

The next day, we finally got to work. We spent a good majority of the day at the Church and Community Center, an organization that provides food, water, clothing, financial support with medical bills, and more to those that need it. We divided ourselves into three teams: one to scrape linoleum glue off the ground, one to install insulation, and one to break shelves and organize trash in the parking lot behind the building. As someone who was on the last one, I can say that was a lot of fun since we were using toys like sledgehammers, crowbars, and hammers, oh my!

Once that was done, we went to a local farm and picked $72 worth of strawberries, which we finished by the end of the week. Ever since tasting them, I can no longer eat strawberries the same way.

To learn more about the Lumbee Tribe and their traditions, we attended Cultural Night, which is held every Monday night at the local Boys and Girl Club by members of the Lumbee Tribe of all ages. They taught us the meaning behind the dances, performed them, and then one of the dances which we then performed. Again, the drums pounded like cannons while the singers raised their voices to pierce the heavens.

Throughout the entire night, they were incredibly humble, kind, and welcoming. An example of this was when I approached one of the Elders of the Tribe to ask him about the tattoo that he had on his arm and if it had a meaning, since I noticed that he and some of the other members there that night had tattoos that seemed to have a pattern to them. He then gladly explained to me that it was the origin story of the world in their culture, and he pointed to each element of the tattoo as he did so.

One of the things that stuck the most out to me that night was something one of the Elders said; “In our tribe, we teach our younger members to be teachers.” As a future teacher, I think that’s just too cool, for I am constantly pursuing knowledge, and if everyone is a teacher, they are going to be giving back to their community by sharing the infinite wealth of information that exists in our world. It also is great to see, because I believe teaching others to be teachers produces leaders within a community.

Tuesday morning, we woke up and packed our lunches, then set out in our cars to meet Mac so he could guide us down the Lumber River on a kayaking trip. Despite having been hit heavy rain, the beauty of the river lived on, especially in the blue herons we stopped to watch. Being the college students that we are, we named our boats, the highlights being “Noah’s Ark,” “Vincent van Boat,” and “Butts! Butts! Butts!”

Afterwards, we attended the Long-Term Recovery meeting, which meets frequently to check in on the progress of recovery of Lumberton and further plan recovery efforts. We learned that there were still 149 families that were still in motels because their homes were destroyed, but we also learned that the amount of families in motels had also gone down by about 80 since the last time that they had a meeting. We also helped brainstorm ideas for a festival that was going to be held in the future. Later that night, some of us went to a substance abuse meeting to watch the kids of some of the people in the meeting.

Later that evening, we had a campfire at which we did reflection on our faith like we did every other night that week. We also had smores, laughed, sang songs, and told stories.

Wednesday, we got back to work, finishing insulation at the Church and Community Center, while another team put together the types of shelves one would see in a Dollar Store for the Center’s food bank. It didn’t help that we were not given any instruction manuals and that the pieces were tossed around like a salad, but we figured it out regardless. After lunch, we went to a museum at UNCP on Native Americans, and from there, we split into two groups: one that finished the shelves at the Church and Community Center, and one that played with and tutored kids at the Boys and Girls Club.

That evening, we participated in a Bible Study with some people of the church that the parsonage we were sleeping in was attached to, along with some scholars from Chinese Universities. Dinner preceded the Study, and food cultures of China and the South fiercely competed for attention that meal, and they were both delicious.

Thursday was our last day in town that week before we left for home, and we spent a lot of it learning as much as we could about the community, starting at the Indian Education Center. We learned a lot about the history of the Lumbee Tribe, including their involvement in the Civil War, their lack of national recognition, and the time they scared off the Ku Klux Klan by shooting guns into the air and killing no one. Interestingly, we learned that the Lumbee Tribe was never dislocated over the history of America, partly because they were open to the idea of intermixing since that’s what their Tribe originally was; a mixing of several North Carolina tribes into one. However, the thing that made them survive is the same thing that is keeping them from receiving national recognition. The federal government is requiring them to choose a single background when it is simply an impossibility because of this.

Kenneth, the man that was telling us about all this at the Indian Education Center, then offered to show us a wigwam, longhouse, and Spiritual Circle that the Lumbee used to use. The wigwam and longhouse were both constructed of nothing but sticks, logs, and bark. The Spiritual Circle used to be used by the Lumbee Tribe on solstices and equinoxes for pow-wows. Outlining it were wood benches painted in four colors; red, black, yellow, and white. Sound like a certain flag? We found joy in this coincidence throughout the week, and especially enjoyed sharing it with Kenneth at the Indian Education Center.

He then led us by car to the home of Herman and Loretta Oxendine, locals who specialize in traditional crafts. While Herman makes hand-shaped pottery that he fired in a pit, Loretta made pine-needle baskets. As we stood in their workshop, I looked around and noticed all the beautiful clutter. Paintings adorned the walls, some of them depicting houses, others illustrating fields. Wooden necklaces hung from hooks on the walls. On the shelves sat unopened packages of toy cars, baskets of differing sizes and shades, and pottery with a common design on them. Old iron-workings sat on some of the tables, and cobwebs sat in some of the corners.

They told us stories of growing up in Lumberton. One of the most interesting things they told us was about segregation, and how there, they had an addition labels for Indians. They told us that they didn’t really think anything of it, it was just the way things were.

We then met Mac at River Ways, a boating company that he has, and we did a lot of work in there, including cutting out a section of his floor and prying it up, cleaning the mold off a porch, and laying down linoleum flooring.

Later that evening, after we ate, we had a service that was meant for us to reflect on the trip. We were joined by two members from St. Mark’s and some students from UNCP. One of the seniors told us that we had learned more about the area than in a week than she had learned in the four years she had been going there. As we reflected over the trip, we came upon three themes: community, knowing our stories, and envisioning a better future.

As we left Lumberton Friday morning, I felt myself searching for a deeper community than the one that I had on campus already. It’s funny how every time we do something out of our comfort zone, we find more about ourselves and others, broadening not just our community, but our passions in the world as well. They say that the time for experimentation is college, but one has to wonder whether that time frame needs to be broadened.