

Comedian Chris Rock's wife visits New Orleans on a mission to serve

Posted by [mcmontoy](#) April 20, 2009 05:00AM



Ted Jackson / The Times-Picayune

Malaak Compton-Rock, wife of Chris Rock visits with her volunteer group during a work break, as she leads a group of at-risk kids from Brooklyn to Chalmette to rebuild homes.

The first thing I noticed about the young volunteers was how full of joy they were.

While they applied Sheetrock mud to walls, they laughed. They sang. They stopped for a moment and danced to the music that filled the two-story brick house in Chalmette.

"When they told us we'd be mudding, I thought this was going to be a lot easier," Jasmine Figueroa said. "This is hard work."

Jasmine, 14, was one of 26 young people who came to New Orleans from Brooklyn last week to volunteer with the St. Bernard Project.

They are part of Journey for Change: Empowering Youth Through Global Service, a program started by Malaak Compton-Rock, wife of comedian Chris Rock.

"To me, service is one of the greatest things any human being can do," Compton-Rock said. "But if you live in an inner city and your whole life is in five or six blocks, how do you learn about service?"

Compton-Rock came up with a way: She would take 30 at-risk 12- to 15-year-olds from some of the most impoverished neighborhoods of Brooklyn and spend a year showing them life beyond their borough.

"Travel allows you to see the world differently," she said.

She would help them understand how much they have and how much they have to give, and they would become "global ambassadors" through service, education and advocacy.



Ted Jackson / The Times-Picayune

Lisa Vaccarella describes her Katrina experiences to the volunteers working on her home in Chalmette.

Almost all the teenagers attend the after-school program at the Salvation Army Bushwick Community Center, where Chris Rock spent his free time when he was growing up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn.

"The center was instrumental in his life," Compton-Rock said.

When she started going to the center to meet the kids and establish a library and a computer lab, she began to understand why it meant so much to him.

"It's a really special place," she said.

The idea for Journey for Change came during one of Compton-Rock's visits to South Africa, where she has a program for orphans and grandmother-led households in an area devastated by AIDS.

"I was telling one of the grannies about the center when I realized I needed to bring those kids to South Africa," she said. "Not until they see global poverty -- poverty on a level they can't even imagine -- do they understand the inherent blessings they have living in the United States of America."

In August 2008, she took 30 young people to shantytowns in Johannesburg for two weeks, where they held orphans, planted gardens, visited families, repaired shacks, talked to children in middle schools and volunteered at clinics.

"Some of the children were HIV-positive," Jasmine said. "That was the hardest part."

"There were a lot of tears," Zuliana Burnett, 14, said. "We met two boys who were taking care of each other because their parents were dead. They used the same pot to eat out of and to go to the bathroom. We bought them a new cooking pot."

Compton-Rock wanted her ambassadors to see the beauty of South Africa and learn its history, too, so they went on a safari, visited museums and learned about apartheid.



Ted Jackson / The Times-Picayune

Volunteer Yolaine Calixte gives a bear hug to 4-year-old Zahra Savannah, daughter of Chris Rock.

And when it was time to leave, they begged to stay, to help, to give some more.

"When I told them that wasn't possible, they asked if they could do another service trip," Compton-Rock said.

She told them yes, but she wanted it to be in their own country, where there are plenty of opportunities to give back. And that is how they ended up repairing houses in Chalmette and Violet last week.

"I've been here five or six times since the hurricane, and I personally feel, after the initial coverage, this area doesn't get the attention it deserves," Compton-Rock said.

She chose the St. Bernard Project because she likes working with nonprofit grassroots groups, and she was inspired by the story of its founders, Zack Rosenberg and Liz McCartney, the young couple who left their jobs in Washington and made a commitment to rebuild St. Bernard Parish "one house at a time."

"They show how serving can change the whole trajectory of your life," she said.

Lisa Vaccarella, owner of the house in Chalmette the young people were working on, said she is eternally grateful to the St. Bernard Project.

"Every time I walk through the door, I see something new and I get excited," she said. "It would have taken me years to do this on my own."

The day I visited, she had taken time off from work as a guard at the St. Bernard Parish jail to make a big pot of jambalaya for the volunteers and take photographs of them working.

"I always take pictures of the workers and put them on Facebook, so when they go home they can see them and they can see how the house is coming along," she said.

During an afternoon break, the young volunteers sat down outside and listened to Vaccarella's story.

She told them how the mud in her house was knee-high after the storm, how she'd lost all her family photos, her furniture, her clothes, everything, and how everyone in the parish had gone through the same thing.

She told them how one of her sons evacuated to Houston, met a woman, got married and never came home.

"They have a little girl now," she said wistfully. "You just never think one of your kids is going to live in another state."

She told them how eight family members who lost their homes were scattered around Louisiana and Mississippi now, and as she talked, the young ambassadors began to understand: She didn't just lose her belongings. She lost the fabric of her life.

But there she was, feeding them, taking their pictures and thanking them for their help.

When it was time to get back to work, Donovan Rodgers, 14, wanted to take a minute to tell me how Journey for Change has made a difference to him.

"I think about how ungrateful I was to my mom," he said. "Now I don't give her a hard time. And I don't complain and want a new pair of sneakers every time I get a speck of dirt on them."

And what will he do when his year of service is over?

"I like helping people and seeing the smiles on their faces," he said. "I'm going to look for more opportunities like this and expand my mind about giving."

Donovan's face was covered with a fine layer of Sheetrock dust, and he went back to work, sanding the dry mud smooth while he moved to the music and sang along with Rihanna: "You can stand under my umbrella, ella, ella."

"Service and dancing at the same time," said Compton-Rock, as she tried her hand at mudding. "What could be better than that?"

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Comments

hall62 says...

Nice story for a change. Take note local ministers, this is how to be positive. We need more Chris Rocks and Bil Cosbys in this world.

Posted on 04/20/09 at 9:00AM

Immmss says...

My gosh, what a fantastic story! Mrs. Compton-Rock and her organization are amazing!!! She's not just throwing money at something, she's throwing herself right in there, too. God bless her, these children, Journey for Change and all those whose lives have been touched by them!

Posted on 04/20/09 at 9:04AM

aries1492 says...

Good story and it makes me feel good.

Posted on 04/20/09 at 9:32AM

BearDown63 says...

Great! Loved it. Bless the Rocks.

Posted on 04/20/09 at 10:26AM

prot says...

A little bit of good news for a change. There is some good left in this sad world. I wish we didn't have to dig for it to find it. Thank you to the Rock family. A family that instills values to their young and shows others how to face life without letting it stare you down. Thank you. Thank you thank you.

Posted on 04/20/09 at 12:55PM

macstchick says...

This is wonderful. There are still some good people in this world.

Posted on 04/20/09 at 1:02PM

safensound says...

What a wonderful story, indeed. I was so touched by this article. May God bless all involved, especially the Rock family. We need more of this in the communities where hope seems to dwindle and to let these kids know that there are more to life than the ghetto living and being conformed to one area. A positive impact like this can make a whole lot of difference in a kid's life in the future. And we, as Americans, need to count our blessings to be fortunate enough to live in this country compared to the torturous and poverty living in parts of African and other third world countries. Again, a wonderful story that should touch every heart of every person reading it.

Posted on 04/20/09 at 2:26PM

julielarme says...

This is awesome!! I've never been a fan of Chris Rock's but I certainly am of his wife!! What a great idea!! Thanks for your help in St Bernard!!

Posted on 04/20/09 at 2:53PM

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