When Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans and coastal Mississippi on August 29, 2005, the MIT community response was immediate and productive. The MIT fund-raising drive, which included Lincoln Labs, raised over $40,000 in donations which was sent to organizations in the affected areas. Other funds were raised to support student involvement in recovery efforts. The Graduate Student Council provided $15,000 for graduate student projects, the Coop Board of Directors donated more than $34,000 through the PSC to fund student work, and the Kurtz Family Foundation also contributed generously. With these resources, the PSC has helped to support more than a hundred MIT students to help the affected communities.

While the gulf coast devastation and recovery have moved to the back pages of the newspaper, MIT students are still at work in the region, applying their substantial knowledge and skills to address continuing problems and needs. In this issue we feature three MIT students whose contributions have provided sustainable benefit to communities in the region.

Zachary Lamb, a graduate student in the School of Architecture and Planning, spent most of the summer of 2006 in Houma, Louisiana, on a Public Service Fellowship, working on the Louisiana Lift House, an MIT initiative to provide housing for the Gulf Coast. The Lift House sits 8 to 10 feet off the ground on flood-resistant stilts and is designed so it can be safely lifted, after construction, by volunteer labor. Working with Oxfam America, the Louisiana non-profit Terrebonne Readiness Assistance Coalition (TRAC), and local engineers and architects, Zachary played an essential role in moving forward the construction and engineering drawings for the Lift House. He also coordinated 90 volunteers as they rebuilt and rehabilitated houses throughout the bayou region. Zachary returned to the area this past January and worked with MIT architecture students.
Sharlene Leurig, a graduate student in Course 11, spent her Public Service Fellowship in the summer of 2006 helping to establish a soil remediation demonstration garden in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans. She researched local efforts to mitigate post-Katrina soil contamination and met with public health researchers and landscape architects addressing soil contamination through design interventions. The garden, completed in March 2007, includes an exhibition space designed to inform visitors of plants capable of removing or degrading soil contamination. Along with four other MIT students, she also organized the Returning Safely workshop series, which connected residents with legal and public health experts on issues including housing rights, soil contamination, and safe cleanup for flooded homes.

One of the first students to respond to the disaster, Jessica Berman Boatright is still involved in New Orleans recovery work. During IAP 2006, she assisted a consortium of organizations to create a conference focused on community partnerships for rebuilding. Making it Happen: A New Orleans Rebuilding Resource Festival was one of the city’s first planning events, enabling over 400 people to spend three days discussing solutions for education, health care, economic development, and housing. During spring 2006, Jessica worked as a Teaching Assistant for the Katrina Practicum, a course that provides technical support to Ujaama in their efforts to develop housing in the Treme neighborhood. Currently a Research Assistant with Professor Phil Thompson, she is coordinating the work of MIT student volunteers in New Orleans.

Consummate problem solvers, MIT students are still working to help communities recover from one of the deadliest and costliest disasters in US history.
Locally speaking

Turning Lives Around through CommuniTech (FACT and UCF)

Priscilla Lopes, a counselor at the Cambridge Employment Program, describes CommuniTech’s effect on her clients: “It has literally turned their lives around.” CommuniTech is a two-part program that enables MIT volunteers to work with adult computer literacy and then supply refurbished computers to those in need.

One CommuniTech client, a resident in the Carey Men’s Transitional Housing program, a residential counseling program for formerly homeless and substance addicted men, had not been in touch with his daughter for years. Over six Saturdays in FACT (Families Accessing Computers Together), he learned how to use a computer, access the internet, and send and receive email. He located his daughter over the internet, and soon found himself in touch with her on a regular basis through email. When he graduated from the CommuniTech program, his daughter, who lived out of state, attended his graduation. Now a construction worker, he stays in touch with her using the refurbished computer that was donated to him.

In the news

Transformations in the Philippines

First Step Coral, an IDEAS 2006 winning team spent January on coral reef restoration in the Philippines with a PSC Fellowship, and were featured in the February 1, 2007 issue of the Philippine Daily Inquirer. Using their BioRock method to hasten coral growth, the team installed three working models at the Sagay Marine Reserve powered by solar panels, wind turbines, and tidal turbines.

Also given front page space in Business World, a Philippine newspaper, was the Philippine Emerging Startups Open (PESO), created by PSC Fellows Neil Ruiz, a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science, and Johanna Klein, G, in Management, along with a supportive team of Filipino businessmen and Filipino students. The business plan competition is now an annual event catalyzing a Filipino entrepreneurial spirit that is very much alive and thriving.
him through the UCF (Used Computer Factory).

“I didn’t feel like I was a part of what was going on in the world and with everyone else,” is how Havivah Zeltzer describes her life before CommuniTech. Three years ago, Havivah, a low-income individual with learning disabilities, participated in the program. She now uses her refurbished computer to communicate professionally with staff at the Chestnut Hill School for Jewish Studies in Newton, Massachusetts, where she teaches Sunday school. “Now I’m with the 21st century,” she says.

Stephen Johnson, Program Coordinator for the Carey Program, has watched residents restart their lives and enter the computer age. Learning computer skills that are often second nature to the more privileged population “has contributed greatly to the self esteem of the residents, and interest in the program continues to be very high,” Stephen says.

One Carey Program member who participated in FACT Level 2, an advanced class in Excel, PowerPoint, computer hardware basics, and advanced internet skills, received a promotion due, in part, to the sophisticated spreadsheets he came up with comparing the costs of particular suppliers in his job as a property manager.

In 2006...

535 students participated in Service Learning classes in five departments.

79 adults in the Boston/Cambridge area were clients of CommuniTech.

255 7th and 8th graders participated in ScienceExpo mentored by 107 MIT students.

95 students participated in international development work through the PSC in the form of fellowships, grants, and the IDEAS Competition.

Henry Wu began as a volunteer instructor in CommuniTech during his freshman year, and for the past two years he has coordinated UCF and FACT. “I liked CommuniTech’s mission to bridge the Digital Divide both by offering a computer course and by donating refurbished computers. A small group of people can make a huge difference in the world. [In the end] it’s gratifying to know how two hours on a Saturday can affect someone else’s life.” Henry says. Henry also developed invaluable leadership skills and feels that “the program has shaped [him] as a person.” “I’m grateful that I got involved from the start.” Henry states.
Service learning

Solving Real Problems
This spring marks the kick-off of a new service learning course offered through the Mechanical Engineering department. Sponsored by the d’Arbeloff Fund for Excellence, 2.00B, Solving Real Problems, combines engineering and technical communication in the service of solving real-world problems. Working in teams, with advice and support from community partners, mentors, and instructors, freshmen learn engineering basics which are then applied to problems faced by communities in need.

Currently the students are working with the Boston Partnership for Older Adults to design lighting devices for use by visually-impaired elders in restaurant settings; the Food Project to re-design their Dorchester community garden’s composting device; and Maya Pedal to improve their pedal-powered concrete mixer.

Our sponsors

Class of ‘72 Service Learning Endowment
As part of their fund-raising efforts for their 35th Reunion, MIT’s Class of 1972 has established an endowed fund to provide support for students participating in service learning. Members of the Class of 1972 Reunion Gift Committee enthusiastically supported this new project as a way to provide financial resources to incorporate community service projects into coursework. The resources will enable MIT students to gain valuable educational experience while providing significant benefits to the communities they serve. Funds will be administered through the PSC’s Service Learning Grant program.

Students helping students helping communities in need
A campaign to encourage undergraduates to consider philanthropy completed its first year this spring. Begun in the fall by the Alumni Association, the Underclassmen Giving Campaign asks students to give any amount to the Public Service Center Expedition Grant program. While the financial returns are not large, the campaign encourages students to consider giving to a worthwhile cause early on in their education. The participation rate for the Class of 2010 was 30%, and all of the classes combined raised $3,881 during the fall and spring campaigns. This year’s expedition grants covered, in part, the purchase of four water-carrying donkeys in Kenya, HIV and solar water disinfection projects for Argentina, and environmental education at the Hindu Girls School in the Republic of Mauritius.

All donations are important
From small monthly gifts to major endowments, your contribution can help support the IDEAS Competition, our Fellowships, our Service Learning program, and more. We are happy to help you invest in a public service program of your choice. Contact Sally Susnowitz, Director of the PSC, at susnowit@mit.edu or 617-258-7344.

A water-carrying donkey in Kenya
IDEAS Competition Awards Ceremony & Reception
Wednesday, May 2, 7:30 pm
MIT Stata Center, 32-123

web.mit.edu/mitpsc