



Sri Lankan Students Contribute to New Orleans Rebuilding Project

by Anna Reynoso

Nalaka Kahawatte traveled to the Big Easy for a unique experience but instead of visiting New Orleans for the typical Mardi Gras celebration he went to build something lasting. Kahawatte, a graduating senior from Sri Lanka majoring mechatronic engineering, was as part of the third College of Engineering, Computer Science and Construction Management student group to assist in the rebuilding New Orleans, along with fellow Sri Lankan students Hiran Rathnasinghe and Kishan Manamperi.

There is a lot of rebuilding in New Orleans, Kahawatte said. While in New Orleans, the students helped build five houses in the Musicians Village, a housing project initiated by a Harry Connick, Jr. and Branford Marsalis. The New Orleans natives raise funds to build houses for the musicians who have help characterize the city's culture. The ECC group worked with Habitat for Humanity to install roofs, insulation and paint the newly built homes.

The ECC group stayed at a camp run by Habitat for Humanity named Camp Hope, which is about 10 miles away from the work sites. For a week they woke up at 6 a.m. and worked until 4 p.m., Kahawatte said. The 115 person group was motivated and working to make a difference. Many times they didn't want to take breaks because they went to New Orleans to work, Kahawatte said. Everyone was pumped up and ready to work.

Kahawatte enjoys doing community service projects and thought he could bring something extra to the project because of his experience helping to rebuild communities

after tsunamis in Sri Lanka. The spirit and the amount of volunteers rebuilding the city were inspirational to Kahawatte. “The joy we got from the experience is a great feeling,” Kahawatte said. The Barge House was named for the barge that hit house when the levees broke and water flooded the neighborhood. The 100-year-old owner of the house had one wish. She wanted to die in the home where she raised her family. The impact the reconstruction of the Barge House had on the woman’s life reminded him of the importance of his contribution.

Kahawatte was most inspired by the unity of the Chico State students and their focus on contributing. “The Chico State team spirit got a lot of things done,” Kahawatte said. It was a joy to do something great. The New Orleans culture was an experience for Kahawatte who enjoyed the food and southern hospitality. “When you got there you felt the warmth,” Kahawatte said. Kahawatte ate crocodile meat, gumbo and jumboli. Dishes he had never had or heard of before his trip.