

SPRING SHOPTALK

By Ted Montgomery

In the fall of 2006 I started receiving notices from IEDC of volunteer opportunities in Mississippi and Louisiana to help stimulate the economic recovery from the devastating hurricanes Katrina and Rita in September of 2005. I remember thinking at the time how rewarding it might be to assist an area of our country so devastated by a natural disaster.

At the end of the year I received a notice from our finance office that I still had three weeks vacation which had to be used by the end of January or I had to request an extension until June 30. I quickly decided that the most productive way to use some of that time was to offer my services to IEDC and assist a community who needed help. I was asked to go to Lake Charles a city of 70,000 in Southwest Louisiana.

I flew into Houston about 75 miles away and drove to Lake Charles on Sunday, January 28, 2007. I had never been to Lake Charles so I really didn't know what to expect from this community that, like so much of Southwest Louisiana, was so devastated by the winds of Hurricane Rita in September of 2005. What I found was a prosperous port city close to the Petra-Chemical Industry of Louisiana with casinos and a very visible waterfront on Lake Charles and the Calcasieu River which meanders through Calcasieu and Cameron Parishes into the Gulf of Mexico.

I arrived in Lake Charles on a rainy Sunday afternoon and immediately drove downtown to the business district and drew an immediate impression which was reinforced over the next five days. The impression was that the downtown needed people living there, providing "feet on the street" in order to impact the local economy. In my initial drive through I did not see a single person nor did I spot any business activity at all except one Citgo station near the lake.

I reported to work the next day at the Chamber of Commerce Office, which recently merged with the Southwest Partnership for Economic Development and changed its name to the Alliance, at 8 a.m. as I did for the following four days. The first morning I did a drive through with the city's economic development coordinator, Adrian Wallace, who showed me the areas they wanted me to focus on. One of the areas was a mixed use neighborhood with a few businesses, some small industry and a number of residential units located on the Calcasieu River. The other area was the Central Business District which I had viewed when I arrived in Lake Charles.

After my five days I submitted a final report and left to return to Connecticut with an extremely favorable impression of Southwest Louisiana and its citizens. The Alliance also hosted an SBDC office and was home to an agent from the Louisiana Department of Economic Development who covered the three parish region. Louisiana, like the rest of the South really values economic development, and it showed, as everyone I came in contact with from City Hall to the Chamber demonstrated a real knowledge of the importance of private investment and the success of the business community.

The week was a great experience for me and I strongly encourage other colleagues around the country to also volunteer for this very rewarding experience. The contact person at IEDC is Andrea Bauerfeind, who can be reached at abauerfeind@iedconline.org. If anyone has questions about my week long experience in Louisiana, please do not hesitate to contact me at tmonty@snet.net.