

I.I.I. Pro Bono Duty Pays Off in New Orleans

Two professional women from opposite sides of the country joined volunteers from the insurance industry by donating their summer holiday weekend to help feed construction workers and displaced residents over Memorial Day in one of the hardest hit areas of New Orleans, still recovering from Hurricane Katrina.

Lisa Shin, a vice president with the asset management department at J.P. Morgan in San Francisco, joined her friend, Washington D. C. attorney Tai Lui Tan, on the Gulf Coast this summer to provide nourishment for workers toiling in the wreckage almost two years after wind and rain reeked havoc on the historic city. The women enjoyed the food, fellowship, and music they found in the heart of the community at the Dragon Café at St. George's Episcopal Church.

The St. George's meal program continues to serve more than 300 meals per week to construction workers and local residents displaced by the wind and rain of Katrina. The food and companionship are available free of charge each Thursday and Friday evening.

The free meal program—dubbed the Rebuilding with Heart—is dedicated to the mission: “You can't rebuild New Orleans on an empty stomach.” The church kitchen is staffed entirely with volunteer labor.

The enterprise is funded by partner churches, individual donations, and a grant from the Arizona chapter of Casualty Property Insurance Underwriters (CPCU). The insurance industry has taken a role at the Dragon Café, including volunteers from International Insurance Institute who are regulars in the church kitchen.

People are drawn to the Dragon Café by various placards on St. Charles Avenue, newspaper ads, word-of-mouth, and the sweet sound of music produced by the Panama Jazz Band.

The kitchen is not an easy place to find for tourists not familiar with the ravaged downtown core. Shin and Tan discovered the Dragon Café with some guidance from the Office of Disaster Relief. They went to New Orleans with the intent of serving and lending a helping hand to the people in need.

“We meet at least once every year for a ‘charitable’ vacation and New Orleans seemed like the ideal place for us to pitch in and contribute in our own small way,” said Shin, who had not been to the Louisiana coast for more than 10 years.

“Wherever we are, it's the people who make our journeys memorable. That was never truer than in New Orleans.”

A Charitable Vacation

Tan, an attorney with the international law firm of Mayer Brown LLP, explained that she and Shin were excited about the opportunity to serve and contribute to the rebuilding of this great city. The pair eagerly took their assigned positions to help serve the evening meal on their first day in town.

“The church was located in a portion of the city that looked like it was working hard to recover,” said Tan. “This was a very grounding experience.”

The women broke bread with laborers and



local residents who are still working hard to recover after government workers have packed up and moved on. Parishioners from St. George's mingle during the twice-weekly dinners with police, construction workers, relief professionals, and volunteers.

“The simple fact that there is still a need for volunteer kitchens in every corner of this city tells you there is plenty of work still to be done,” said Tan.

This was not the first time the two friends have committed vacation time to humanitarian efforts. The pair had previously flown to Honduras and Guatemala to work in medical facilities that served the indigenous people in each Central American nation.

While in New Orleans, Shin and Tan met a young professional woman who rushes to the church after work on Thursday and Friday for both dinner and fellowship.

“The Dragon Café has become my community,” the woman said, as she was evicted from her apartment and had all of her possessions thrown away when she was forced to evacuate. The woman relies on meals at the Dragon Cafe while she continues her search for an affordable place to live.

Editor's Note: The CPCU grant was made, in part, in response to an article that appeared in a previous issue of Claims Education Magazine.

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— Washington D.C. attorney Tai Lui Tan