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## Oregon native volunteers on the bayou

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GRAY — Evan Ponder was in New Orleans, thousands of miles away from his home, a few months after Hurricane Katrina unleashed its destruction on the city.

Ponder was 17 at the time, and like many of his fellow volunteers — Presbyterians who traveled from across the country — he was shocked to see the abandoned houses and empty neighborhoods and saddened by the lack of progress to rebuild a city and a region.

But something about the people piqued his interest.

“I couldn't really understand why the homeowners, whose homes I was working on, would express this desire to be back here,” he said. “At the time I couldn't understand in a tangible way why they would have this strong connection. This meant something to them.”

Ponder said he thought a lot about local residents' strong connection to New Orleans after he returned home to Portland, Ore. He left the Northwest to attend Grinnell College, a private university in rural Iowa. There, he found a group of Presbyterian students who were heading down to Louisiana to volunteer for post-Katrina rebuilding work. Ponder accepted the opportunity to return. He volunteered in New Orleans six times over the next four years.

Now, Ponder, 23, is back in Louisiana, only this time he's volunteering in Gray, at First Presbyterian Church of Bayou Blue. He will lead an environmental outreach program that will demonstrate to out-of-state volunteers the importance of coastal restoration. He is participating through the Young Adult Volunteer Program, run by the national Presbyterian Church.

“When I graduated, I was interested in seeing some things from a different perspective,” he said.



*Abby tabor/Staff*

Evan Ponder sits in the First Presbyterian Church of Bayou Blue Sunday afternoon.

Bayou Blue's pastor, Kris Peterson, put out the notice she was looking for someone to teach out-of-state volunteers about the important role Louisiana's coastal wetlands and barrier islands serve.

“One of our concerns was that people were going home only knowing about rebuilding homes instead of rebuilding the wetlands,” she said. “We need to be making sure people all over the country know what's happening here and that we need to be pro-active.”

Ponder, out-of-state himself and a seasoned volunteer, applied to the position Peterson advertised.

“Kris let me know what her ideas were for this position and the types of things I'd be involved with,” he said. “We started thinking about the larger issues behind recovery.”

He said he was anxious to get back to Louisiana, to see parts of the region beyond New Orleans, where he spent most of his time previously.

“Things are much more diverse than I realized in my short trips here before,” he said. “It's been a lot of learning, and it's been a lot to wrap my head around. I'm still trying to figure out how everything fits together.”

Peterson approached the national church to lobby for resources and to draw attention to the need for coastal restoration. She convinced the national church to provide money to a coastal wetlands education center she wants to create at her church in Gray. Planning for the education center is just beginning.

Ponder will eventually give educational outreach presentations at the center, and he will write monthly newsletters to keep the church's network of over 20,000 national volunteers updated on coastal-restoration efforts.

“He's a great kid.” Peterson said. “He is going to do some important work.”

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