



WILLIAM WIDMER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Evacueers, volunteers who will help New Orleans residents evacuate in a hurricane, include, from left, Kataalyst Alcindor, Emma Storm Herr, Fred Neal Jr., Robert X. Fogarty, Sayde Finkel, Bivian Lee III, Laine Frey, Fresh Johnson and David Morris.

Volunteer Effort Promotes Hurricane Awareness

By DAVE THIER

NEW ORLEANS — For most city officials here, making plans to evacuate tens of thousands of residents from the wrath of a hurricane brings to mind a tangle of logistics: bus routes, out-of-state shelters, fresh water supplies, public safety. But for one young transplant named Robert X. Fogarty, evacuation means 12-foot-tall sculptures placed strategically around town.

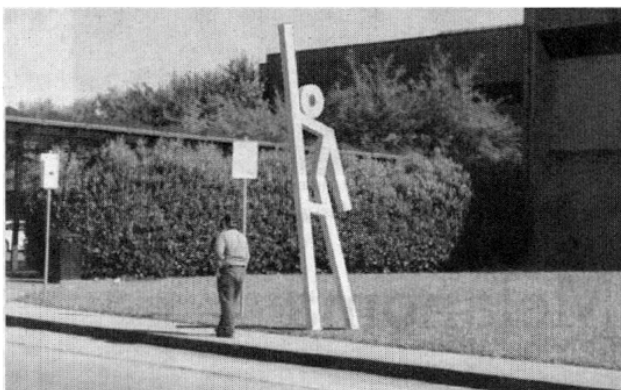
Mr. Fogarty, 28, a Nebraska native who came to New Orleans five years ago as an AmeriCorps volunteer, is still volunteering, as the head of the nonprofit Evacueer.org, an organization that recruits, trains and manages an army of about 350 volunteers every year to evacuate the city in case of a hurricane.

Hurricane awareness has not been a hard sell to people still reeling from Hurricane Katrina. But as memories of the floods recede, Mr. Fogarty and city officials are looking for ways to keep the potential of mandatory evacuation present in the popular consciousness.

"That's our biggest challenge as a city moving forward," Mr. Fogarty said. "It's the natural sequence of events of, 'Well, nothing happened last year...'"

Right now, there are 17 pickup points around New Orleans. They are easy to miss — all that marks them are some small signs with instructions on what evacuees are allowed to bring with them. Mr. Fogarty and his allies in city government thought they could do better. A few months ago he helped come up with a plan to commission a set of 17 sculptures to serve as markers at each "Evacuspot." For seasoned officials, the project looks a little strange.

"A lot of the Homeland Security and Emergency Management guys are like, 'Just get me money for a bigger sign,' but I like the challenge," Mr. Fogarty said. "These are two things that don't normally play in the sandbox together."



COMPUTER RENDERING BY DOUGLAS KORNFELD

The "Evacuspot" program will place 17 sculptures around New Orleans at pickup locations in the event of a hurricane.

In 2007, Mr. Fogarty, a 2005 graduate of the University of Oregon, had burned out on a career as a Wall Street headhunter and requested a posting in New Orleans from AmeriCorps, the national service program. He found himself filling in for the recently laid-off volunteer coordinator in City Hall when the mayor called for a mandatory evacuation in the face of Hurricane Gustav in 2008. His had suddenly become a crucial job.

Hurricane Gustav's full fury narrowly bypassed New Orleans, but more than 200,000 people were evacuated as a precaution. As everyone else was fleeing as quickly as possible, Mr. Fogarty and his volunteers were helping to get people without their own transportation onto buses with everything they needed.

After that, it became clear that volunteers were going to be an important part of any future evacuation. After his term with AmeriCorps expired, Mr. Fogarty put together a proposal to start Evacueer.org and presented it to Lt. Col. Jerry W. Sneed, a retired Marine Corps officer who runs the city's emergency preparedness office. They decided to try to make it permanent. Now, Evacueer tries to keep the city ready for a hurricane-scale evacuation every year by recruiting a team of volunteers from people in the

city and keeping them trained for evacuation with a series of workshops throughout hurricane season. And by giving them a few parties.

Art has always had a role to play with Evacueer, and seemed a logical outgrowth of Mr. Fogarty's interest in art and community engagement. He also started Dear World — originally Dear New Orleans — a series of photographs of people with messages written on their bodies and hands that has included luminaries like the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Susan Sarandon, Rahm Emanuel and the Saints quarterback Drew Brees. Mr. Fogarty's income from speaking engagements related to Dear World allows him to run Evacueer unsalaried.

For Evacuspots, the design chosen came from a Boston artist, Douglas Kornfeld, known for large, simple figure sculptures. It features a 12-foot-high frame of a person reaching up as if to hail a cab, wave to someone across the street or, as some have suggested, try to grab some Mardi Gras beads.

For Mr. Kornfeld and the jury that chose it, the key to the design was that it had to communicate safety in an emergency without being an oppressive reminder of impending doom.

It is an appropriate symbol for

an organization that does not have a hand in any of the basic mechanics of an evacuation; that is left to the city and the state. What Evacueer specializes in is trying to make sure that people who are evacuating feel informed and cared for.

"It allowed for that human touch that the National Guard can't have," said City Councilwoman Kristin Gisleson Palmer, who served as a volunteer coordinator during Hurricane Gustav. "Because there was that level of humanity that you wouldn't normally have, it kept everything calm."

Evacueer is financed by a hodgepodge of private donations and fund-raisers and ad-hoc drives for initiatives like the Evacuspot project — in 2011, the organization's total operating expenses were just over \$20,000. But the organization is growing, looking to hire its first full-time staff member and angling for inclusion in the city budget with the help of Ms. Palmer.

As Evacueer works to codify itself into the fabric of the city, Mr. Fogarty and others wonder whether other hurricane-prone communities on the Gulf Coast and elsewhere might benefit from a similar program.

"I think everybody should have an evacuation plan, a disaster plan, and no cities have enough resources to do this without some type of help," Colonel Sneed said. "We're encouraging them to look into our model."

But keeping an evacuation plan on the books and a volunteer network humming is only half the battle. For Mr. Fogarty and the rest of Evacueer's supporters, the real challenge is in making evacuation a part of the city culture.

"We may not have to evacuate for six years," he said. "But if some guy has been taking the bus he gets at Palmer Park for the last six years, and we have to evacuate and he sees this thing come across the news he's going to be like, 'Oh, I know exactly where that is.'"