Robert Schultz and I were driving along Albany Avenue in West Hartford, on our way to a Bank of America branch in order to cash some checks, when we passed a tree with leaves that on Sept. 6 had prematurely begun to change color.

“I have never seen the trees change color, and I am looking forward to coming back to Hartford to see them,” Robert said in his wonderfully soft New Orleans accent. This very simple statement is one of the most hopeful and heartwarming comments I have ever heard. Let me explain why.

Robert and his wife, Jean, had been stranded in Hartford the previous weekend, having brought their daughter, Michelle, to begin her career as a voice student in The Hartt School. While they were in Connecticut, Hurricane Katrina hit their hometown. Their house in the Lakeview section of New Orleans was now in 16 feet of water.

Given the complete and unexpected devastation he and his family had suffered, for Robert to tell me that he was looking forward to returning to Hartford to see the fall foliage was, I think, a triumph of hope and the human spirit. I will never forget it.

This same triumph of hope and the human spirit was obvious all across the university in the wake of a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. For me, it reemphasized the wonderful sense of community we showed nearly four years earlier, on and immediately after Sept. 11, 2001. It is what makes this university a wonderful place to study, to learn, and to live—not only for our students but also for our faculty and staff.

I am especially proud of the efforts of Mitchell Piper and Barbara Porter of The Hartt School. Because they had recruited Michelle to study in the voice program and had welcomed her to Hartford, they were the first to respond to the family’s needs. They raised money, for example, to bring the Schultzes’ son, Chad, a high school junior, to Hartford from Houston, where he had evacuated with his aunt and her family. People from the university and the local community provided money to get the Schultzes through the immediate crisis, and Mitch Piper even opened his home to them for an evening that Robert and Jean told me went a long way toward lifting their spirits.

Like universities and colleges all around the country, the university also opened its doors to New Orleans students who had been displaced from their studies by the aftermath of the hurricane. As of this writing in mid-September, four students have enrolled for the fall semester, and we all hope that they will be able to return to their home universities, Tulane and Loyola, for the spring. One of these students, Catherine Dinan, is the daughter of Beverly Smith, a staff member in the Barney School, so this story really is about family here at the university.

The outpouring of generosity here has also been tremendous, as it has been all over the country. Students, both in groups and individually, raised money and collected goods for the relief effort. In fact, student drives for goods were so successful that we had to replace a van originally designated to carry the supplies to the State Armory, where the statewide collection effort was being coordinated, with a much larger box truck. Our Mail Services staff played a central role in the collection, but I especially wish to recognize Ken Kulas ’04, now a graduate student and the graduate student regent on the university’s board of regents, who coordinated all of the student efforts. Ken’s spirit exemplifies the community spirit of our alumni.

This outpouring of love and compassion for those less fortunate should be at the core of who we are as individuals and as a society.

—Walter Harrison

In addition, thanks to the efforts of Lee Peters, vice president for student affairs, residential students on meal plans were able to contribute to the relief efforts by skipping a meal on Sept. 7. The thousands of dollars that would have gone to prepare their meals were given to the relief effort.

Ken Kulas ’04 (right foreground) and members of Alpha Sigma Phi load campus contributions for Hurricane Katrina victims. The fraternity also raised $1,200, which was matched by the employer of a former Alpha Sigma Phi member.
food went instead to the Red Cross, a contribution that the university was proud to match with its own funds.

I am certainly not surprised by all of this wonderful generosity. It is a hallmark of this university, one of its most inspiring traits. I believe, in fact, that this is a central part of our mission as a university. We not only prepare students for successful careers; we prepare them for successful lives as citizens in a democracy. This outpouring of love and compassion for those less fortunate should be at the core of who we are as individuals and as a society. Our students see this behavior modeled in the lives of our faculty, our staff, and our alumni as they have this fall, and they discuss it and reflect on it in their classes. I couldn’t be prouder of our community.

On Aug. 29, we officially opened the ISET complex, just hours after Hurricane Katrina had struck the Gulf Coast. As I looked out at the crowd assembled for the joyous opening, I thought about how important the integrated approach to technology, engineering, science, and the health professions would be to our future abilities to prepare for and respond to such disasters. In rebuilding New Orleans and its sister cities on the Gulf Coast, we will need new approaches to engineering and technology. Our students, and their colleagues at universities across the country, will help us find and develop the methods and strategies to do this.

In all three phases of our mission as a university—in preparing students for successful careers, for rewarding personal lives, and for useful citizenship in a democracy—we are not only responding to this unspeakable catastrophe but also preparing our world to respond more effectively to similar crises in the future. This is what gives us meaning and provides fulfillment to those of us who work so hard to support the university.

All this is very abstract, I realize. But as I said goodbye to the Schultzes, who were preparing to leave for Jacksonville, Fla., where their family was gathering, Chad Schultz, Michelle’s 16-year-old brother, gave me a more concrete reason to see hope after this disaster. “You know,” he said, “I might just decide to come to the university to study too. The girls in Michelle’s dorm were really cute!”

Expressions of hope come in many varieties. They all reflect the beauty of the human spirit.

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First of all, thank you to all those who filled out The Observer’s online readership survey, which asked questions about the summer issue of the magazine. We placed a link in Chapters, the monthly e-mail newsletter sent out by the Office of Alumni Relations. We also provided a link on The Observer’s online home page at www.hartford.edu/observer. About 100 readers took time out of their busy schedules to give us an honest evaluation of the magazine. We thought you might like to know what they had to say.

Most of our respondents say they like The Observer. We were happy to learn that 70.7 percent considered the magazine either “excellent” or “very good.” To the 28 percent who described it as “average,” we hope to change your minds in the near future.

We heard from readers as far away as Thailand and Bermuda, but most were in New England, and 25 percent were in Connecticut. Those who graduated in the 1990s made up the largest group of respondents, followed by the 1970s. Our oldest respondent graduated in 1954 and our youngest expects to graduate in 2006.

One survey question asked if anything were missing from The Observer. The most-often-mentioned subjects were sports news, articles featuring students and/or student life, more pictures of campus, more alumni profiles, and updates on faculty. Some asked for more class notes. I’d like to remind all alumni to send in your news, whether it’s a new marriage, a new baby, a new job, or personal recognition such as awards and promotions. You can send me an e-mail, use the form on The Observer Web site, or contact the Office of Alumni Relations.

In this issue of The Observer we’ve added a section called Hawk News to bring you sports updates in each issue. An article written by Professor Bernard den Ouden describes a Summerterm class that visited the Pine Ridge Reservation in Minnesota. Watch for more changes in future issues.

We hope more of you will follow the link to the next Observer reader survey, which will focus on the articles in this issue. It will appear in the October issue of Chapters and at The Observer online version of the fall issue. We’ve made sure the survey is short and easy to complete, so give us your opinions. We’re all ears.

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