



STAFF PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER A. RECORD - crecord@charlotteobserver.com

Laura James (left) works on a performance with Ernest Brown and others Wednesday at Charlotte's Urban Ministry Center.

# Homeless tell Katrina's stories

*Urban Ministry Center troupe shows off artistic side in theater piece*

BY JULIE YORK COPPENS  
Theater Writer

"We lost everything," the woman says, her face in her hands. "We don't have nowhere to go."

The counselor nods. He's been hearing the same sad stories from Katrina evacuees all day. Then he offers this tip: "If you ain't got a good sleeping bag, get you one of them big, black Hefty bags. ... But don't seal it up like a regular sleeping bag. Leave you a little hole up top so's you can breathe."

Who better to advise the

newly homeless than the experienced homeless? That's the idea, anyway, behind one scene in an unusual theater piece now in rehearsal at Charlotte's Urban Ministry Center.

A troupe of about 20 ministry clients, employees and volunteers has worked on the project since Saturday with four visiting artists from Los Angeles' Skid Row. The show, "An Emergency Evacuation Plan for the City of Charlotte," is a series of improvised sketches looking at the lives of the needy through the lens of the hurricane aftermath.

Friday's premiere will be the first public event in UMC's handsome new building, whose official opening will be April 9. "Evacuation Plan" will also be performed Saturday at Davidson College.



Annie McClendon-Gurley (from left), Kevin Michael Key and Little Shiva work on a scene from "An Emergency Evacuation Plan for the City of Charlotte," which premieres Friday at the Ministry Center's new building.



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Tony Parker, a member of the Los Angeles Poverty Dept. performance group, provides some music for the theater piece. Members of the group visited Charlotte to help work on the Urban Ministry project.

# Homeless tell storm's stories

## Theater *from IB*

Davidson College senior Kendal Stewart, an Urban Ministry volunteer, landed a \$10,000 Sunshine Lady grant to bring members of the acclaimed Los Angeles Poverty Dept. to town for a weeklong residency.

She learned about LAPD, a performance group made up mostly of homeless people, and director John Malpede last year, while working on a class presentation about community-based theater.

"The idea is to empower the participants, to give them a voice, and to bring up an issue that's going on in the community and address it," Stewart says.

## Want to Go?

**An Emergency Evacuation Plan for the City of Charlotte**  
**PERFORMANCES:** 8 p.m. Friday at Urban Ministry Center's new building, 945 N. College St.; 8 p.m. Saturday in Sprinkle Room, Union building, Davidson College Campus. Discussions will follow both shows.  
**ADMISSION:** Free.  
**DETAILS:** (704) 347-0278; [www.urbanministrycenter.org](http://www.urbanministrycenter.org); [www.lapovertydept.org](http://www.lapovertydept.org).

"Hopefully you get to see homeless people in a new light," says Lawrence Cann, head of Urban Ministry's arts programs.

"As talented people who have a real wisdom and sense of humor about their situation."

Laura James, for instance, hasn't acted since her ninth-grade play.

Decades later, theater was the last thing she thought she'd have the opportunity to do as a homeless person.

"It's been so many years," says James, who plays one of the Katrina victims lining up for dubious advice at an emergency shelter. "I just laugh all the way through."

She hopes she can pull it together in time for Friday's opening.

"It's going to be exciting," James says. "I think people will say, 'I didn't know she could do that!'"