

Assumption College students repair homes in Tuscaloosa

By Jason Morton / Staff Writer

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For the seventh time since a tornado tore apart 12 percent of Tuscaloosa in 2011, a group of students and staff members from a small, Catholic liberal arts college in New England has returned here to help out.

Much of the rebuilding from the April 27, 2011, storm is complete, but the volunteers from

Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, keep coming.

This week, they're here working through Habitat for Humanity of Tuscaloosa to repair two homes in parts of the city that were unharmed by the storm.

But that doesn't mean there isn't work to be done.

"It's become near and dear to our hearts," said Zachary Shepard, an Assumption College senior majoring chemistry, about Tuscaloosa.

This is his first time visiting the Druid City, and the elements did not allow him and his friends to escape the harshness of winter.

While Assumption College was set to be closed this week because of the threat of 12 inches of snow, the volunteers were met in Alabama with some of the coldest temperatures of the season.

Adding to that, the water pipes in their original "temporary home" burst, forcing them to relocate. They're now taking shelter in upstairs classrooms of First Presbyterian Church.

Despite this, Shepard said he and his fellow volunteers were happy to be here, having come to know Tuscaloosa thanks to Michael Land, an assistant professor of English at Assumption College and son of Charlie Land, former publisher of The Tuscaloosa News.

Michael Land was influential in the first trip, in 2012, by Assumption College's SEND — Students Exploring New Destinations — service program, which allows students to participate in community building projects across the nation.

Since then, the group has returned at least once a year.

“We keep coming back because we have a great student body and they’re always looking for ways to give back,” Shepard said.