

Worker's memory plants seeds for trees outside Katrina homes

by [Bruce Nolan](#)

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NEW ORLEANS (RNS) The last time Matt Sloan saw Sylvia Blanchard's house after he and Episcopal volunteer crews reclaimed it from Hurricane Katrina, the Blanchards were back in and it was neat, clean and smelling new.

But it was raw, too, in the way of new construction: no greenery, no shade trees, no landscaping to soften the hard angles of its little lot.

Two things have changed since: The little front yard is sodded, gardens are planted and young palms and crape myrtles hold the promise of grace and shade.

And at age 29, Sloan has died.

If Sloan's family and friends can make it happen, the plantings will be the beginning of his legacy, which is to build a small organization that will continue to landscape the homes of New Orleans flood victims whose every penny went into construction costs, leaving their rebuilt homes barren outside.

Sloan's mother, Judy, said her son wished to "feed the souls" in his adopted city of New Orleans.

Matt's Trees, an organization formed in his memory, is raising money to continue residential plantings around New Orleans the way he had planned, his mother said.

Like thousands of others, Sloan was a Katrina volunteer so moved by his first trips into the flood zone that it changed his life.

He moved from North Carolina to New Orleans in January and worked for six months for the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana as a construction crew chief, supervising volunteer crews. Mostly he supervised the rebuilding of Blanchard's home for herself and her bedridden husband, Anthony.

"It bothered him tremendously that while they were rebuilding, it was still so stark, so ugly, so barren," his mother said.

Sloan died of heatstroke June 13 at the Bonnaroo music festival in Manchester, Tenn.

"At his death at 29, he had more friends than most people make in a lifetime," said Judy Sloan from her home in North Carolina.

Sloan was not yet buried when the idea to plant trees and shrubs in New Orleans in his memory took root. The first solicitations toward that cause are in his obituary. They quickly raised \$6,000.

In November, his family and friends came down to New Orleans for their first project, to landscape Blanchard's house.

"We started with Sylvia because he loved her," his mother said. "I didn't care whether we did one house or 50. That house was going to get done."