A Clean Sweep
The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) tapped three graduates of SU’s geography program to help clean up the BP Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf Coast region.

Last summer, Stephanie Hill ’08 worked for Consolidated Safety Services as a data manager onboard a research vessel charged with “hunting” the oil plume and collecting water samples. Traveling from the wellhead to about 100 kilometers southwest, she gathered and analyzed the data, before sharing it with officials from BP, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and NOAA’s Subsurface Monitoring Unit.

She later joined a Shoreline Cleanup Assessment Technique (SCAT) team in Gulf Shores, AL. “My crew was among the first to start snorkeling in the surf zone to search for buried or surface oil,” she said. “So far, we’ve helped them locate and clean up nearly 300,000 pounds of tar from the Alabama coast.”

Bryan Thom ’10 and Emily Watson ’08 work side-by-side as geographic information systems (GIS) analysts for Research Planning, Inc. They create daily maps of the Louisiana coast for SCAT coordinators who make recommendations for cleanup crews.

“We spatially interpret data, including the location and thickness of oil, as well as any environmental concerns,” Bryan said. He was on his way to their home base in Houma, LA, just three days after receiving his SU diploma.

Emily, who landed an interview with Research Planning, Inc. soon after graduation, said: “My atmospheric science studies helped me understand how beaches change and, in turn, how they can weather the oil.”

For one family of SU grads, the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010 led to a crossing of career paths. Emergency spill response and disaster management are not traditional careers, but for the Wallace family it is all in a day’s work. Eldest brother George ’95 describes their experiences in responding to this national disaster that captured the world’s attention.

My younger brother, United States Coast Guard (USCG) LT Patrick Wallace ’99, and I both played a role responding to the spill. As a vice president of business development, I responded as a member of Miller Environmental Group’s (MEG) Management Team to perform oil spill response operations in the Offshore, Nearshore and Onshore environments. MEG is under contract to perform oil spill response services to Marine Spill Response Corporation as well as National Response Corporation, both of which were prime contractors to BP. My role focused on contract and client interaction. I worked from the Incident Command Post in Mobile, AL, ensuring that MEG was properly positioned given the operational direction from the Unified Command, which consisted of the USCG; the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida; as well as BP MEG was primarily operating in Pascagoula, MS, and Pensacola, FL, from early May through mid-November 2010.

By the end of June, the spill response had expanded to over 35,000 responders stretching from Morgan City, LA, to Tampa, FL. The USCG was deployed to oversee and assist the cleanup operation, and that is where Patrick became involved in the response. He served as the USCG Safety Officer at the Incident Command Post in Houma, LA, from late June through the end of July. Patrick supervised 61 personnel operating at eight Forward Operating Bases in three branches with a Vessel Safety Branch operating throughout USCG Area of Responsibility. He developed site safety plans, job hazard analyses, and planned and coordinated safety support across multiple jurisdictional lines to include liaising with OSHA, EPA, NIOSH, Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, and United States Fish and Wildlife.

For both of us, the experience was quite challenging and exciting at the same time. In the coming year, I will participate in many of the “lessons learned” sessions to explore areas for improvement throughout the oil spill response realm. Patrick recently completed his master’s degree in public health at the University of Maryland and has been recognized as part of the USCG Response Team that managed the health and safety of the oil spill responders.

Author’s Note: George and Patrick’s siblings are also SU graduates. Edward ’97 is also involved in the emergency response/disaster management business. A Major in the North Carolina National Guard, he received his master’s degree in emergency and disaster management from American Military University, and was involved in last winter’s North Carolina snow emergencies. Marie Wallace Mynster ’92 is a homemaker living in New Bern, NC, with her husband Chris and their four children.