



The Little



Difficult

Volunteers, scholars, and activists struggle to make New Orleans “easy” again

by Nicole Pezold / GSAS '04

Photographs by Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun

CHILDREN PLAY AS THE FAMILY REBUILDS THEIR HOME IN NEW ORLEANS' LOWER NINTH WARD.

One way to grasp the immense burden of life in New Orleans these days—three years after Hurricane Katrina and fresh from the threat of Hurricane Gustav—is to think back to the third anniversary of 9/11. Though the mood in New York City was somber and Ground Zero still a gaping hole, Lower Manhattan had more or less returned. The population had surged by one-quarter over the intervening years, so that a spot in one of the local public schools—some of the city’s best—was as coveted as ever. The wait for a table at Bubby’s restaurant in Tribeca was back to 45 minutes, and the Century 21 department store was once again jammed at lunchtime.

New Orleans, however, now holds less than three-quarters of its former population, an untold number of whom are newcomers. Most people are crammed into the districts that had little or no flooding, so the Save-A-Center in Mid-City and the Whole Foods in Uptown are packed, but in Gentilly, Lakeview, the Lower Ninth Ward, and New Orleans East, shops are dark, many still covered with post-flood residue. With the dearth of housing, rents have nearly doubled.

But if Katrina made life in New Orleans far from the proverbial easy, many people have also come to see its aftermath as a tabula rasa

on which to heal faltering systems in education and health care, as well as confront old demons of poverty and racism. You see it in the work of Project Home Again, which is building low-energy houses in Gentilly with a \$20 million gift by Barnes & Noble chairman Leonard Riggio (STERN nongrad alum), as well as Brad Pitt, who, inspired by one woman’s plea to “make it right,” launched a foundation that aims not merely to rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward but to construct affordable and sustainable homes.

Joining them are myriad grassroots or-

ganizations and neighborhood associations seeking to reweave the frayed social fabric, and academics, including many from NYU, who are taking up difficult questions in business, disaster policy, and social work to better understand what is happening in New Orleans and what it means for all of us. Jeffrey A. Robinson, who while a professor at the Stern School of Business made regular trips to consult with local socially minded entrepreneurs, says: “There is certainly a



1. NEAR THE FRENCH QUARTER, RESIDENTS WAIT FOR A BUS—ONE OF ONLY A FIFTH OF PUBLIC TRANSIT ROUTES NOW IN OPERATION. 2 & 3. MORE THAN ONE MILLION VOLUNTEERS HAVE PITCHED IN TO HELP THE BELEAGUERED CITY, INCLUDING WAYNE EASTMAN AND HIS SON FROM NEW JERSEY AND BUSINESS PROFESSOR RICHARD LAPCHICK AND HIS STUDENTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA. 4. TV HOME IMPROVEMENT GURU MIKE HOLMES POSES WITH GLORIA GUY, OWNER OF ONE OF THE FIRST HOMES TO BE BUILT BY THE MAKE IT RIGHT FOUNDATION. 5 & 6. BUILDING SITES FOR MAKE IT RIGHT, ONE OF SEVERAL NON-PROFITS HELPING TO REBUILD THE CITY WITH AFFORDABLE HOUSING. 7. LOWER NINTH WARD RESIDENT ROBERT GREEN AND HIS DAUGHTER, CHYANA, TOUR THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD TO SEE THE PROGRESS. 8. NENA, OR THE NEIGHBORHOOD EMPOWERMENT NETWORK ASSOCIATION, OFFERS RECONSTRUCTION INFO AT A LOCAL FESTIVAL.

group of people who are saying this is our chance to change things for good."

The roadblocks home

The traffic on St. Claude Avenue, a main thoroughfare in the Lower Ninth Ward, is steady for a weekday at noon. You still see the occasional shells of houses that bear rescuers' iconic spray-painted scabble, now faded brown, as well as vacant lots where razed houses have yet to be replaced. But the streets no longer call to mind an apocalypse as they did in 2005 when Katrina steamrolled the levee wall along the nearby Industrial Canal. Here and there, neat new homes stand erect, freshly painted.

The constant hum of saws, drills, and hoses suggests that people are surely coming back.

"Come here after six o'clock and you're gonna get a different story," says Wanda Talton, sitting at her desk in the air-conditioned cinder block building of the Lower Ninth's Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association, known as NENA. Most people, she says, commute to the neighborhood to rebuild their homes by day, leaving at night for other parts of the city, the suburbs, or as far away as Baton Rouge and Hattiesburg, Mississippi. A mere 10 percent of the neighborhood's 19,500 residents have returned. That even this many are here is in part thanks to NENA, which,

since its founding by a Lower Ninth native in 2006, has guided some 1,200 people home.

"There are people in this country who think, 'It's 2008! By God, they've got to be finished rebuilding by now,'" Talton says, with a hint of ferocity. "Well, they have no clue about the Road Home process, the paperwork galore." The Road Home program issues federal money to help homeowners rebuild or recoup their losses, and its labyrinthine bureaucracy, along with insurance companies and lenders, has constrained the pace of recovery. NENA steers owners through this morass and helps manage the building process, from drafting free floor plans to vetting electricians and plumbers. And when the money falls short—as it almost always does, given an average payment of less than \$60,000—NENA appeals to charities on behalf of the owner to finish the job.

NENA is not alone. Across the city, 242 neighborhood associations have been reenergized and another 28 founded in Katrina's wake. These groups have become centers of activism, challenging the government not to forget or forsake them. When the city had yet to replace street signs a year after the hurricane, for example, the Claiborne-University Neighborhood Association handmade them. Gentilly residents, with the help of researchers from Dartmouth College, went door-to-door to map the state of rebuilding in their area, which they continue to update on an interactive new Web site.

But for all of these efforts, many neighborhoods are caught in a Catch-22: Residents are hesitant to move back because of the lack of services, while businesses stay shuttered because they fear they'll have no customers. Citywide, nearly 10,000 employers have closed or moved out of town; only 6,000 have replaced them, a disproportionate number of which are construction related, according to the April 2008 New Orleans Index. "You can build all the houses you want. If people don't have jobs, they're not going to come back," says business profes-

sor Robinson, who has studied the trajectory of aid from Congress to the city and notes the limp support for business development, most of

which has come in the form of loans. Small- and medium-size businesses, Robinson says, have proven skittish about



wracking up additional credit on top of whatever debt they had pre-Katrina. Louisiana has awoken to this reality and last year began offering grants to preexisting businesses in an experimental program. The state also opened an office of social entrepreneurship as a clearinghouse for information and resources to ease the path of innovative start-ups such as NENA.

Broken policies

To understand how the city got here, one must look back to the time just after the levees broke, when water from the surge and Lake Pontchartrain submerged 80 percent of the city—an area more than six times the size of Manhattan. After the famously bungled emergency response, authorities forcibly evacuated the entire city and kept residents out for weeks or even, in some neighborhoods, months. This flung New Orleanians into a Diaspora across the country and stripped the city almost entirely of its tax base. By October 2005, New Orleans was forced to lay off *half* of all city workers. Only the most essential personnel—firefighters, police officers, sewage workers—survived the cut. Private utility providers fared little better. With a reduced staff and no security, BellSouth faced the gargantuan task of physically relaying phone lines for a half million people they hoped would return.

Spurred on by federal disaster policies, these events set off a cycle of destabilization, says Mitchell L. Moss, an urban policy and planning professor at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. And, he adds, this has been a regular occurrence since the start of the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear war pushed the feds to assume the primary burden of disaster recovery from charities and local government. Over time, lawmakers have amended policy simply by layering on new regulations and agencies, rather than reforming the entire structure so that, Moss says, “Every time we have a disaster, the limits of federal policy and the overlapping rules—sometimes conflicting rules—create obstacles.”

What’s more, a calamity on the scale of 9/11 or Katrina is held to the same aid caps and regulations as a blizzard in Buffalo or a tornado in Omaha. There’s no mechanism to prop up a city government financially, much less private utilities or businesses, in dire emergency. And when a city does receive reconstruction aid, it may only rebuild infrastructure to its condition when de-

stroyed. After 9/11, this meant New York City could not add air-conditioning to the subway platforms (or make any other improvements) at the WTC site. In New Orleans, a place Moss bluntly describes as “a failing city” long before the storm, this has presented a constant economic hurdle.

Failing maybe, but not finished

It’s true that by the time Katrina rolled through, New Orleans had



by most measures—crime, health, literacy, wealth—quietly sunk into decay. Over the years, one industry after another had folded: sugar, commercial fishing, trade, shipping. The final blow came when the petroleum companies moved to Houston. Only tourism survived, but those jobs were generally low-paying and seasonal. Between 1960 and 2003, one-quarter of the population fled. At the time of the storm, 28 percent of New Orleanians lived in poverty; many were black. But visitors might never have known this if they roamed only the French Quarter and the business district. “We were all so shocked that there were so many poor black people in New Orleans and we had abandoned them for days,” Robert Hawkins, McSilver assistant professor in poverty studies at the Silver School of Social Work, remembers of

the events that unfolded. “We had abandoned them for *decades*. For all their lives!”

This spectacle shook many people out of complacency, both in New Orleans and beyond. Since 2005, more than one million volunteers have offered their services to the beleaguered city, including more than 500 NYU students. And while it’s still easy enough to hide out on

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Bourbon Street, more tourists are investing their money and their sweat here—so much so that the state of Louisiana founded a “voluntourism” office to connect visitors to volunteer opportunities, from mowing vacant lots to triaging patients at the Common Ground Health Clinic, which offers free medical care.

Common Ground, which is located in Algiers, a neighborhood along the west bank of the Mississippi River that escaped flooding, attracts people from all over New Orleans. “There’s a line at the door a half hour, sometimes an hour, before the clinic even opens,” says Marie Romeo (SSSW ’07), a Long Island native who first volunteered over spring break in 2006 while a master’s student in the Silver School of Social Work. She was so moved by the work that she convinced the dean to allow her to complete her degree from New Orleans.

The clinic was born in the early days after the storm, when two city residents called on volunteer medics to roam door-to-door, handing out emergency medication, food, and water. With gifted supplies and an all-volunteer staff, they soon set up a free 24-hour clinic in the donated space of a mosque. They’ve since moved across the street to a former corner store, ruffled in peeling aqua and coral paint, and now operate only four days a week. Though the urgency has subsided, Romeo says many of the health problems remain the same: diseases of the poor, such as diabetes and hypertension. Once these patients might have gone to Charity Hospital, the notorious public facility that, before Katrina, served an estimated 90 percent of the city’s uninsured and was known as the “provider of last resort.” But Charity, also the state’s preeminent trauma center,

remains shuttered while officials negotiate how to fund a new, modern medical complex. In the meantime, Common Ground’s mission has evolved to address disparities made evident by the storm. They sponsor seminars to examine how racism influences health care and what it means to be community-based. A weathered plywood placard out

front reminds in a faint scrawl: “THIS IS SOLIDARITY, NOT CHARITY.”

As the work of groups such as NENA and Common Ground buoys the physical recovery, the act of restitching the city’s social fabric appears equally healing, according to Hawkins, the



1. THE YOUNG LIONS KEEP TRUE TO NEW ORLEANS’ JAZZ TRADITIONS—NECKTIE AND ALL. 2 & 3. CHILDREN AT PLAY THIS SUMMER IN THE LOWER NINTH WARD. 4. TAMMY ATKINSON DIRECTS HER CLASS OUT OF THE CAFETERIA AT THE ARTHUR ASHE CHARTER SCHOOL IN UPTOWN. 5. STUDENTS LINE UP ON THEIR FIRST DAY OF CLASS AT ARTHUR ASHE, ONE OF DOZENS OF NEW CHARTER SCHOOLS IN THE CITY. 6. SPECTATORS AWAIT THE MARDI GRAS INDIANS ALONG SOUTH CLAIBORNE AVE. 7: A FATHER DROPS OFF HIS DAUGHTER ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL.

1. PATIENTS STOP BY THE COMMON GROUND HEALTH CLINIC IN THE WEST BANK NEIGHBORHOOD OF ALGIERS. 2. THE CLINIC WAS FOUNDED IMMEDIATELY AFTER KATRINA TO FILL THE VACUUM OF MEDICAL CARE. 3. THOUGH THE CLINIC IS FREE, ITS MISSION, AS THE SIGN SAYS, IS "SOLIDARITY, NOT CHARITY." 4. A ROW OF NEW HOUSES IN THE HISTORIC SEVENTH WARD.



poverty researcher. With funding from NYU's Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response and the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research, he followed 40 displaced families, three-quarters of which were lower income, for 18 months to observe the role that social capital—family, friends, church, and neighborhoods—played in recovery. Hawkins found that though most participants had endured incredible economic, physical, and emotional hardship, what people longed for most was the return of those social bonds. One participant told him, "You fix my community, you have fixed my life."

The course ahead

Of all the efforts to change the course of the city, none seem more hopeful than what's happening in the schools. Most of the children who have returned to New Orleans came back two to three years below grade level, and emotionally tender. This is in part because of the chaos following Katrina. But fault may also be found in the infamous New Orleans Public School System, which for decades was underfunded and deficient, and, after the storm, was wracked with debt, bereft of buildings and even teachers. The state assumed control of most of the city's public schools. Since then, more than half have reopened as charter schools, offering more versatile curricula and focusing on lifting not only reading comprehension but confidence and morale as well.

With only anecdotal or self-reported evidence so far, these schools appear to be turning the system



around. In the year since the Arthur Ashe Charter School in Uptown reopened, for example, Principal Bree Dusseault says that most students, 95 percent of whom are black and most of whom are eligible for free or reduced lunch, have caught up to their grade level. Although Ashe was founded before Katrina as the New Orleans Charter Middle School—the first charter in the city, in fact—they have restarted small with only 50 fifth and sixth graders and five teachers. This has enabled them, as Dusseault, the sole administrator last year, puts it, "to be in everyone's business all the time. I have every parent in my cell phone and so do all of the teachers," she adds. "We know everyone's first name, last name, and most of the kids' middle names."



They have also exposed students to a range of careers through regular Friday speakers, including the New Orleans Shell Shockers soccer team and a group of Stern MBA students who ran the youngsters through a crash course on how to start a friendship bracelet business, from raising capital to marketing. Mel Ochoa (STERN '08), who organized the trip and has taught the curriculum before, noticed that the Ashe students seemed more shy and hesitant than most. But with rebuilding so much in the air, they quickly grasped terms such as "loan" and "revenue" and applied them to local businesses rather than multinationals such as Nike and Coca-Cola, examples previous students relied on. "It was the first time I've seen that, students using real-world examples from their community," Ochoa says. For weeks after the



Stern volunteers left, Dusseault recalls hearing students throw around new vocabulary such as "venture capitalist" and "entrepreneur."

This fall, Ashe added a seventh grade, as well as a kindergarten and first grade, tripling its size. Like other schools, finding and retaining talent is a constant worry. For now, all of last year's teachers are returning and Ashe stands as a model of the possibilities here, with its organic garden planted with help from Alice Waters' nonprofit Edible Schoolyard New Orleans and

a playground donated by the nonprofit KaBOOM!, which the students designed in purple, green, and gold. Once reserved for Mardi Gras, that tricolor has grown into a ubiquitous symbol of local pride and determination. When asked what New Yorkers and people everywhere must understand about New Orleans today, Dusseault replies, "Everyone is trying and working so hard." ■

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