

## KATRINA ARTICLE

By Tom Reis

We were coming in to New Orleans just after 11pm. Students that had been sleeping most of the day were now wide awake as we drove towards the Upper Ninth Ward. It had been 10 months since Hurricane Katrina had swept through leaving in its wake a devastated city just now stumbling to its feet. Most of our students had never been out of the Midwest, let alone ever driven in to a disaster zone the size of Katrina.

The city was eerily dark and quiet; as we entered the Upper Ninth Ward, there were no street lights on and most of the houses were dark and abandoned. There was no sign of life, not even a dog barking and there were few cars on the street.

We had been on the road for 12 hours that day, well in to our second full day of travel from Minnesota. All of a sudden my van came to a screeching halt as we almost rear ended the van in front of mine. "What the f@&k is going on" as I looked around at my students as they were already on edge as we inched forward in to the "heart of darkness." Then we started slowly to creep ahead as we veered around a pot hole that could have easily swallowed our van. We could have walked faster than our van moved as we were constantly veering from one side of the road to the other avoiding massive pot holes from engulfing our vehicles. The street looked like craters from the moon; like it was targeted from some kind of a bombing run. Just then I remembered what a National Guard member who had served in Iraq said shortly upon arriving in New Orleans; "This looks like another Bagdad only worse!" Soon we passed one house burning to our left and another house burning to our right; there were no fire trucks on the scene to put the fires out.

Finally, we arrived at our destination, St. Mary's School. There were no lights on, only a woman on the front steps smoking a cigarette. As we poured out of our vans, we heard a gunshot in the distance. That's when I whispered back to my

students, "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." This was our welcome to New Orleans and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. St. Mary's would be our home for the next seven days as we partnered up with Common Ground, a grassroots organization spearheading the rejuvenation of the Lower Ninth Ward in its recovery from Hurricane Katrina.

It started out as a vague idea; a nice sentiment amongst our students in the Human Service program at Inver Hills Community College shortly after Katrina hit on August 29, 2005. Never did I imagine that ten months later, my colleague and I, Cheryl Redinger, would be leading a group of 25 faculty and students from our college on a Hurricane Katrina re-building mission. Instead we all watched in helpless horror the television each night bring us live reports about the devastation of Katrina and the suffering people of New Orleans. We would talk about Katrina in our classes and students would periodically implore us with vague requests like, "We've got to do something about this." I quietly thought to myself, "Yea, maybe we can take up a collection and send a check to the Red Cross or maybe organize a clothing drive."

Then one day, Cheryl came in to my office and floated the idea of doing something more, like maybe organizing a student relief trip (I found out later that she was secretly hoping that I would axe the idea saying this was stupid and unrealistic). I had only started at the college that semester having just recently moved in to the area from Washington State in July. We were just getting to know each other back then as colleagues; neither of us knew that the other had a long history of "thinking outside the box." Instead of dismissing her idea as preposterous and unrealistic, I surprised myself and I'm sure Cheryl when I said, "Yea, maybe we could do that." Of course neither one of us had any idea of how we were going to pull this off.

The college administration to its credit was highly supportive of the endeavor. However, because there was no template for such an adventure, we found ourselves "making it up as we go." This was not a "paint by number operation;" we had to create health forms, liability forms, etc. Somehow we put it together enough by the following May we had 25 students and faculty crammed in to five

mini-vans and we were pointed south to New Orleans heading in to the great unknown. I'm reminded of the lyric from the 1970s musical, "Paint Your Wagon": "Where are we headed, I don't know, where we goin I ain't certain all I know is I am on my way!"

There was adopted by the City Council of New Orleans in 2006 an ordinance called "Eminent Domain." This document stated that if property owners hit by the hurricane did not show substantial improvement in repairing their damaged houses, the city could offer them \$8000 for their house and property and take over possession later that year. Some saw this as a veiled, racist way of getting rid of poor, people of color, and property owners from the Lower Ninth Ward. Our mission became early on to gut flood damaged homes filled with mold and water damage as a way of showing substantial improvement and thus, helping poor home owners keep their homes and avoid the consequence of Eminent Domain. When we heard the personal stories of survival from the home owners in which we were gutting their homes, it became our personal and impassioned mission by our students to help save as many homes as possible in the Lower Ninth Ward.

When you gut a home that means stripping all dry wall and mold imbedded materials down to the bare walls leaving only the studs. This involves wearing white Tyvek suits and wearing oxygen masks while toting crowbars and wielding sledge hammers. The work is very hard. For instance, it was not unusual by lunch break to have to change in to a second t-shirt under my Tyvek suit because it was so drenched in sweat; it looked like I had dived in to a swimming pool. The temperatures would hover around triple digits with the humidity regularly registering at over 90% while we were down there. The smell was at times suffocating from rotten food in refrigerators and unabated mold build up from 10 months of sitting in flood damage.

That first year, we spent most of our time gutting Mrs. Reed's house. The only reason why her home survived is because it was a two story brick structure, the only brick house on the block. The first time I saw her house I thought it resembled more of a small apartment building than a single dwelling home. Her house was located only a half mile from the one of the main breaches in the

Lower Ninth Ward. Mrs. Reed was a proud, African American woman in her late 50s who was a former worker in city hall. Her adult son also lived in the same house.

We took out so much rotted dry wall and other debris that we created a pile of garbage that went from the ground floor all the way up to the second story window from which we were throwing all the stuff out of her house. At one point when we were throwing out hundreds of warped and damaged records, Mrs. Reed's son left the house in tears muttering to us, "Do you realize you are throwing my life out that window?" (Apparently he worked part-time as a DJ in a local pub).

This May in 2012 will be our seventh year of going to the Gulf region to help with hurricane Katrina reconstruction efforts. The first three years we worked in New Orleans focusing predominantly on cleanup efforts in both the Upper Ninth Ward and the Lower Ninth Ward. The fourth year we went to Plaquemine Parish which is an extreme southern, rural parish that lost over 80% of its dwellings due to the force of Katrina. The last three years we have partnered up with Habitat for Humanity Gulf Coast in Biloxi, MS in helping reconstruction efforts in that area.

It has been six years since the "Great Deluge" of Katrina hit the Gulf. America sadly has moved on and Katrina has become old news. What the vast majority of Americans don't realize is Katrina devastated over 90,000 square miles or the size of Great Britain. Each year after the trip, Cheryl and I think that will be the last trip to the Gulf for us, only to be pulled back like a magnet by the stories of the Mrs. Reed's and the impassioned pleas of our students to go back and live the motto of our Human Service program: "Be the difference that makes a difference." And so once again, next May, with our little convoy of five mini vans and thirty students and faculty, the pull of Katrina will bring us back down like migratory birds to once again lend a helping hand and help rebuild the region one house at a time.