

THE Aftermath

The force of Hurricane Katrina weighs heavily on the hearts and minds of Americans as her victims struggle to recapture some semblance of normal life. *upscale* goes inside the tragedy to

bring you firsthand accounts of the new reality that so many now face and a shocking look at who really is to blame. Sadness, shock and frustration are familiar emotions for many over the

past several months. But more strongly, there is an underlying sense of resiliency and, what's more, hope. In a time of utter crisis, it's the only thing that some people had to hold on to.



LEFT: ASSOCIATED PRESS/IRON HAVIV; ASSOCIATED PRESS/TOMAS OVALLE

ALL OF US

The sooner we realize we're in this together, the better off we'll be.

Words by Farai Chideya

Now that Hurricane Katrina has drowned New Orleans, many people are blaming the federal government. Some are asking why the wealthiest African-Americans didn't do more sooner. Few are asking why the infrastructure of black self-help failed as surely as the 17th Street levee.

When I say black self-help, I'm not talking about a pie-in-the-sky vision of people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. (How did we end up with that metaphor anyway? How can you haul yourself up by your boots when your butt's still on the ground?) What I'm talking about is more along the lines of the rising tide lifting all boats—something that the gains in black wealth have not done.

In the years since desegregation the black working class has suffered. Some became middle class, but more became working or nonworking poor. And yet wealthy African-Americans have grown in number and assets but still are a small proportion of the nation's black community. Before desegregation, we regularly relied on one another for mutual aid, protection and support. We

stepped in to raise one another's children, lend one another money to buy property and educate communities.

After desegregation, many African-Americans assumed that the government or private industry would do what people had done for one another.

They have not.

I met two young men from New Orleans' Ninth Ward. They were working in downtown New Orleans cleaning hotel rooms for \$8 an hour. Previously, like so many residents of the Ninth Ward, they were unemployed. Where were African-Americans of means (even modest means) who could have employed or trained the thousands of young brothers and sisters in the Ninth Ward? We have, as a culture, become used to accepting as inevitable that many of our adults in urban areas will be unemployed. Now, oddly, the Katrina relief effort offers a pause for reflection and reprieve. African-American business owners are offering to hire sur-



vivors to clean and rebuild, but we all must ask the question: When our communities are in need of services, why do we need a disaster in order to rebuild? We as a community still have the resources—without denying the government's role—to help ourselves, to make sure the rising tide lifts all boats.

Farai Chideya reported on the Katrina recovery efforts in the Gulf Coast region for NPR's *News & Notes* with Ed Gordon.

admirable given the circumstances, the truth is, this is just the beginning of a huge challenge, and the black community is likely going to bear the brunt of the inevitable hardships that await. With many of our communities already impoverished, our schools suffering from a severe lack of funding and a stressed job market, things are going to get worse before they get better.

A few hours and several boxes later, I prepare to leave. The gym is now swelling with people, and volunteers are trickling in by the minute. I glance at the toy section and watch two little girls with pigtails giggle contentedly as they sift through a large box that's overflowing with stuffed animals, an Elmo doll poking out of the top. A small smile escapes me. I only hope that a few months from now, after all the cameras are gone and the country's attention is riveted to the next big news event, someone remembers the victims of Katrina

and sees the importance of sorting shoes.

SMILING FACES

Families look for a future after tragedy.

Words by Nina Hemphill

I see nothing but smiles from the grandchildren of Mary Brown as three-year-old Regina plays with her toy truck and her six-year-old cousin Khalan plays with a ball and paddle. Soon bored with the limitations of the paddle, Khalan asks her grandmother, "Can we go look at the toys?"

Mary, who is stretched out over a small mound of black trash bags filled with her newly donated belongings, answers in a thick Creole accent, "No, leave some for the other children; you have already got yours."

"Well, can we go to the play area?" Khalan asks.

And with Mary's agreement, the two girls leave their toys with their grandmother and run off down the hallway of the Georgia Tech Alexander Memorial Coliseum in Atlanta, which now acts as a shelter for the New Orleans evacuees.

When Mary explains the details of their movie-like escape, I'm amazed by their resilience and ability to still smile considering the hellish ordeal they've just experienced.

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On Aug. 29, what would have ordinarily served as a child's escape from a hot New Orleans day was now their escape from a flooding house. The Browns floated to higher ground on the children's inflatable pool, only to continue their struggle for survival. The younger children, Khalan and Regina, were rescued first by helicopters from atop a roof while the rest of the Browns, Mary, husband Robert and her four children, waited three days on the roof until they were also spared. The family was then reunited at the New Orleans Convention Center after Mary found her granddaughters unattended among throngs of other evacuees. Two days later the Browns were propositioned by a man who offered to drive them out of town in a stolen milk truck. The family made it only to Jefferson Parish, about a



seven-mile drive, when police then pulled them over and held the whole family face-down in the rain at gunpoint. They were later transported to a local school, and by this time, Robert's hand, which he had cut when escaping the flooding house, was now severely infected. Robert's hand was finally noticed by an officer, and

authorities allowed only Robert, Mary and the grandchildren to take an emergency flight to Atlanta, while the older Brown children remained in Louisiana.

With her husband still at a local Atlanta hospital and her children now in Texas, Mary finds herself five days later in the care of the Red Cross, still waiting for her movie-like happy ending.

"It took me a couple days after I was here, but I contacted [my children]," she says now, casually playing with Khalan's abandoned ball and paddle. "I went on the missing-people website and I found them. They were supposed to reunite us and bring them here."

Despite all the unfulfilled promises, Mary is still optimistic about rebuilding her life in Atlanta. "I just want a house for my babies. And the children. They're all grown, but if they choose to come home, I want them to have a house to come back to," she says smiling.

Mary's wasn't the only smile at the shelter. I saw more smiles from people ready to put tragedy behind them and start their lives anew.

It comforted me to know that for these families there was still light at the end of the storm. But I can't help remembering an earlier moment when I observed a young girl's breakdown in the parking lot outside. With her back on the ground and her hands masking her face, she screamed out in several sobs of frustration. Her two friends and the two volunteer workers that witnessed the scene could do nothing but watch. While the Red Cross was there, like the black asphalt, to offer her support, it was still not enough to add comfort and assurance to her situation. As I now reflect on all the men, women and children devastated by the effects of Hurricane Katrina, I only hope they, as well as the young girl, may also one day smile again. *U*

NEVER TOO LATE

You can still help the survivors by donating time, money or goods to the following organizations.

**National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People
NAACP Disaster Relief Fund
866-996-222
naacp.org**

**United Way
Hurricane Katrina Response Fund
800-272-4630
unitedway.org**

**United Negro College Fund
Hurricane Katrina Relief for
Colleges Ruined in by the storm
800-332-8623
uncf.org**

**Salvation Army
Hurricane Relief Fund 2005
800-SAL-ARMY
salvationarmyusa.org**