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Orphaned

An essay by JASON DePARLE

I.

I spent the Christmas of 1984 in the St. Thomas housing project, a parcel of low-rise New Orleans blight tucked beside the Mississippi River. It was a glorious day. Neighbors sat on stoops with their stereos loud, swapping plates of corn bread and shrimp-stuffed squash. Kids — happy kids — played everywhere, with toys that looked especially new in barren courtyards. Big Wheels, bikes, robots and dolls — they had been liberated from layaway with dollars squeezed from welfare and menial jobs. One mother let her phone service lapse to buy a \$100 set of superheroes that her son could not bring himself to like. She laughed and drank a beer. My guide was a teenage tenant, Thomasina Crockett, whose faith in her future had survived the projects for 15 years. “I don’t think God said, ‘Your Mama went out and got pregnant so you have to live in the project,’” she said. “You can bounce back.”

Though bounded by streets called Felicity and Religious, St. Thomas rarely felt so sublime. A few months later, I was standing beside Hope House, a social-service center on the edge of the project, when a pickup truck crashed down the block. Out flew the guy who had stolen it, and behind him the owner, waving a gun. “I should have shot the bastard,” he said as the thief vanished inside the brick maze. I was following a Hope House program that brought in middle-class teenagers to study poverty. Some went through the motions for community-service credits. The most searching, Liz Godeaux, who was 19, felt the misery of the project so deeply that it challenged her faith. She had left the hamlet of Swords, La., with a rosary and a plan: to “show love to the poor.” But some of the poor leered and smelled like beer. When three homeless men appeared on a rainy night, asking for money and food, she stood behind a locked door and cried. “I know that Jesus would have probably went up to them and hugged them,” she said. “But I’m afraid they’re going to hurt me.” By the end of her weeklong stay, she could sum up St. Thomas tersely: “This is a bad place.”

With crack, it got worse. New Orleans set records in the 1990's with its homicide rates, and St. Thomas was especially violent. Some of the victims were "Sesame Street" age. Coco Vessel, a 5-year-old boy friendly with the nuns who worked at Hope House, was playing in the courtyard at dinnertime when one neighbor aimed at another and shot him instead. Sister Lilianne Flavin, his closest nun friend, marked the place with a tree and put down a plaque. "May his death be a reminder of the sacredness of life," it said. A few years later, a truck from the housing authority crushed it.

New Orleans was always a place of unsettling juxtapositions: rosaries, guns and stuffed squash. Now it is physically jarring. I took a drive last month through a city that, almost a year after the storm, remains a collage of tossed wood and crushed metal. The trafficked routes, from the French Quarter to St. Charles Avenue, feint at normalcy. But blocks away are ruins — the bereft cityscapes, the jumbles of junk, captured in the wrenching photographs of Brenda Ann Kenneally.

My driving companion, Bill Quigley, worked in St. Thomas as a seminarian 35 years ago; today he is, in all but title, New Orleans's leading lawyer for the poor, as well as a professor of law at Loyola. "You see any kids?" he said. We were at South Johnson and Melodia, near the showcase campuses of Loyola and Tulane. Six of seven homes on a block stood empty, and the flood line measured six feet high. "Here we are in the middle of the summer — no school — and not a kid as far as you can see," Quigley went on. "Not a bicycle! Not a tricycle! This is a typical New Orleans neighborhood. This isn't particularly stark."

A mile away, we came across a ruined school — in fact, a collection of them. The campus at 2600 South Rocheblave had housed a set of career academies, which a failed New Orleans superintendent, the seventh in 10 years, had championed during his brief tenure. The security gate swung open, along with a classroom door. Drowned legal books, black with mold, covered the classroom floor. An attendance book, open on a desk, gave the room an abandoned-in-a-hurry feel, like a bayou Pompeii. Everywhere was silence.

It was the silence of missing kids. New Orleans had 128,000 children before the storm. No one knows how many have now returned, but just 18 percent of public-school students were back by the end of the school year. With families still trickling home, a midrange estimate has the schools reopening with 38 percent of their old seats filled. Extrapolating

to the child population as whole, that would mean more than 80,000 children are still gone.

Near or far, there is reason to fear how they are faring. With the child poverty rate at 41 percent before Katrina — two and a half times the national average — the city was filled with what social workers call children “at risk.” (They were not at risk equally: 7 percent of white children were poor and 47 percent of blacks.) Some of those kids now miss the bad old days. Howard and Joy Osofsky, a husband-wife team of mental-health experts at the Health Sciences Center of Louisiana State University, have screened more than 2,700 area children since the storm. Among those in fourth grade and beyond, 49 percent met the threshold for clinical referrals. Symptoms included depression, aggression, an abundance of disturbing memories of the storm or an aversion to thinking about it at all. One in seven felt the problems strongly enough to request psychological assistance.

Then again, the resilience of children is a potent force — “a little bit like having God on your side,” the psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg observed decades ago. How well children recover depends in part on the parents from whom they take their cues, drawing strength from strength or angst from angst. The quicker adults settle into homes and jobs, the quicker they settle their kids. But the adults of New Orleans are anything but settled. Every teacher in town knows a child hiding his emotions to protect a troubled parent; psychologists call it “parentification.” It’s hard to avoid the impression that there’s a lot of parentification going on.

We drove east, past a shuttered housing project here, a cluster of tiny trailers there, until a chance turn onto Piety Street surrounded us with kids. They were teenage church campers from as far as Virginia, sweating through protective suits as they ripped out moldy drywall. About 450 had come to town, and with a week’s hard work, they might gut 10 houses. Two doors down, Bernice Mosely, who is 82, leaned on crutches and introduced herself as “a cripple.” She had moved back to her half-gutted house hoping to hire someone to fix it. She had no refrigerator, no stove, no air-conditioning and, despite crime rates that are returning to old levels, no fear. With a few days of food in her cooler, she smiled. “There’s nothing like home,” she said.

There is only so much of this the brain can absorb, so many miles of forlorn lots and empty stores and churches caked with Pontchartrain

mud. Television conveys the fright of the damage but not the scale. We crossed into the Lower Ninth Ward, past an industrial roof caught in a tree. On my last visit, in February, the storm-tossed houses still straddled the streets; most had now been pushed back onto their lots or bulldozed. That is the Ninth Ward's yardstick of progress: wreckage turned to rubble. Not a thing was being rebuilt. Poverty lawyers are by definition drawn to uphill fights. When I asked Quigley how he kept his bearings, he answered with a mix of Catholicism and Zen: "The hardest thing in the world is to have a heart that is totally open to tragedy — like we see all around us — and also open to hope."

II.

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is amazing what damage floodwaters can do. In metro New Orleans, 160,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. Katrina left the city itself with 12 million tons of debris. That is about seven times the amount produced when the World Trade Center collapsed. Before the storm, New Orleans had about 450,000 residents. Postal data released this month found 171,000 had returned. That is 38 percent.

Every problem in the city seems tangled in another. Uprooted trees took water pipes with them, leaving a water system that loses nearly two gallons of every three pumped. Low water pressure is an epidemic. The Times-Picayune, one institution in good working order, wrote about a high-rise condominium that could not feed the sprinklers at the top; it was ordered to keep two firefighters on duty around the clock, at a weekly cost of \$9,000.

Amy Liu and her colleagues at the Brookings Institution in Washington keep a monthly tally of where the rebuilding stands. About 60 percent of former customers have electricity. Just over 40 percent have gas. Seventeen percent of the buses are running. Half the hospitals are closed. So are 77 percent of the child-care centers.

Brookings does not chart leadership, but presidential credibility waned early with six words: "Brownie, you're doing a heckuva job." (Brownie was Michael Brown, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and his fumbling efforts drew national scorn.) President Bush did appear in the French Quarter two weeks later with a pledge to rebuild the city "higher and better." But his attention has been sporadic, and his priorities have been abroad. Two months later, a front-page

editorial in *The Times-Picayune* warned about broken promises. It says something about Bush's Gulf Coast ambitions that his emissary to the region carries such an unambitious title: "federal coordinator."

If federal leadership has been halting, local leadership has halted. Mayor C. Ray Nagin appointed a commission to produce a rebuilding plan, and he has run from it ever since. The plan contemplated a city with a shrunken "footprint," one limited to neighborhoods with plausible elevations and economics. This was rational from a planner's point of view (the city cannot afford all the police, firefighters and utility lines it had) and lethal from a politician's, since it would likely abandon many poor black neighborhoods and some that are not so poor. Greeted with howls of black outrage, it was dead before arrival. But talk of conspiracies abounds. Many black New Orleanians warn that whites are trying to drive them away, and a few even ask whether the destruction was planned.

Avoiding decisions, Nagin clings to the fiction that all neighborhoods can return, while awaiting the results of another planning process, the city's third. The result, if not quite paralysis, is reconstruction torpor. The first person on the block to renovate his house could be caught on the wrong side of the triage tracks, left without utilities, adequate police and fire protection, schools or stores.

Among the puzzles to be solved is the future of public housing. Representative Richard Baker, a white Republican from Baton Rouge, did little for the cause of racial trust when he was overheard thanking God for the projects' destruction. "We finally cleaned up public housing," he said. "We couldn't do it, but God did." Now the federal government wants to knock down about 4,500 of the remaining 7,900 apartments and replace them with mixed-income sites. The U.S. housing secretary, Alphonso Jackson, has a point. New Orleans before the storm was in a demographic death spiral, with middle-class families of all races getting out of town; dangerous to those within and without, the projects were part of the problem. Bill Quigley, who is suing to stop the demolition, also has a point: many low-income families have nowhere else to go, especially since the housing shortage has increased rents by 39 percent in the past year. The projects were nothing to cheer for, but neither is a tourist economy with no place for its cooks or hotel maids to live.

Both sides see vindication in the death of the St. Thomas project, which had seemed so alive that Christmas morning two decades ago. It was torn down in 2001 and replaced by River Garden, a mixed-income complex where apartments rent for more than \$1,200 a month. The housing authority says that subsidies have allowed about 120 low-income families to remain; its critics put the number at 60. Either amounts to a shrunken footprint: St. Thomas, in its heyday, had 1,500 apartments. I caught up with Sister Lillianne, who still works at Hope House, teaching adults to read and write, and keeps on her desk a picture from Coco Vessel's memorial service. We walked to the neighborhood gym, where in the middle of the summer, in the middle of the city, not a soul was at play.

III.

About the time St. Thomas was razed, a Jesuit priest acquired an empty furniture store a mile or so away and turned it into a year-round elementary school for poor families. To send their children to the Good Shepherd School, parents contribute \$100 a year and 75 community service hours. Many of the students come from the projects. All but one are black. That Good Shepherd has been open since January is a tribute to the determination of its principal, Karen Ranatza, who wanted to give her students one place where life could seem normal again. From what I saw, she succeeded.

For all the trauma of the past year, the kids seemed, well, like kids — silly, serious, earnest, funny, waving their hands to talk about the places they had been and the friends they had made. But the storm is never far. When the mayor came for a post-Katrina visit, Ranatza had the students draw their wishes for the city. They do not lack for colored crayons, yet they rendered New Orleans in sepulchral black and white. “They were so aware of the lifelessness,” Ranatza said. “They had internalized it.”

Eleven of 15 fifth graders have returned. All but one live in a trailer. One cannot sleep unless she is near her mother's open bedroom door. Another showed me a letter to her teacher: “I feel so angry and mad at Hurricane Katrina. I feel so emotional.” Ranatza organized a week's trip to a Nantucket summer camp, hoping to help students conquer their fears — of traveling, of leaving parents, of the unknown. Panic set in when the pilot introduced herself. Her name was Katrina.

I asked the fifth graders if they thought the country cared much about New Orleans. “No!” they said.

Tamera: “I don’t have a feeling they care.”

Logan: “President Bush, he stayed in the White House. He didn’t even come and see.”

Devonté: “His wife do. She cares.”

Chelsea: “They’re going to tear down all the projects! They’re building houses on them for people who have money!”

Israel: “A lot of racist people want to move the black people out.”

Tamera: “They bombed the levees. White people!”

Ranatza walked in, hardly surprised at what kids can hear on the streets. “Did black people get flooded?” she said patiently. “Yes. Did white people get flooded? Yes. Did rich people get flooded? Yes. Did poor people get flooded? Yes.”

Then we talked about how flimsy the trailers feel, especially in a storm, and how boring the trips to the Laundromat are and how much garbage is still on the ground. When I asked if there was anything else they want people around the country to hear, Israel spoke up again. His father, a National Guardsman, is in Kuwait, his flooded house was burglarized and someone killed his dog.

“We deserve better,” he said.

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