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Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

By: [Ms. Foundation for Women \(View Profile\)](#)

Families & Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC), New Orleans & Lake Charles, Louisiana

"People need to hear that it's not 'ok' down here. A lot needs to happen: funders need to invest; academics and organizers are all needed. It is an ongoing disaster, a national disaster. For people who care about human beings in this country, if we lose New Orleans it's a huge blow. You can't have the largest displacement of black people and not have it have an effect. The most profound trauma was that the world could see and recognize that kind of racism and poverty and do nothing." **Co-Executive Directors: Gina Womack & Xochitl Bervera**

Gina and Xochitl's Story Gina Womack and Xochitl Bervera, both of New Orleans, started Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) together over six years ago. What began as an informal support group for the mothers and grandmothers of juveniles in detention or at risk of detention has now grown into a bona fide advocacy organization, passing legislation such as the 2003 Juvenile Justice Reform Act; working to close the 700-bed Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth (widely agreed to have been, "a horrific place"); and reducing the number of juveniles in detention in the state from 2,000 to 400. Womack and Bervera have succeeded by making these young people and their families a priority when few others do—and at no point was this more evident than during and after the storm.

When Womack and Bervera learned they would need to evacuate for Hurricane Katrina they headed to the home of organizer Grace Bower, who lives in Lake Charles. Still uncertain about the status of their own homes, they immediately began worrying about the well-being of their members. They knew that many of the families they work with would not have been able to evacuate. And, they were soon to discover, 240 juveniles were in detention in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes. Many of these juveniles had been moved to Orleans Parish Prison, where they found themselves stranded in water up to their necks, covered in sewage, and starving.

Bervera and Womack knew they had to do something to help their members. Despite warnings that people were being turned away from the city at gun point, they found their way back into New Orleans and began the search for juveniles and their families. In that first week, they also decided to raise money to help the families. And at the same time, they began to deal with their own personal losses: they discovered that Womack's Broadmoor home had taken on 5 feet of water. "It was really disheartening," Bervera remembers.

FFLIC: Providing immediate aid for youth and their families after the storm Once state officials learned about the young people detained in Orleans Parish Prison, they contacted FFLIC to help them locate their families, so that the kids could be released into their custody. The FFLIC team went to the Convention Center and the Superdome in New Orleans, asking people if one of their family members was a detained juvenile. They went to shelters in Houston and other cities asking the same question. "We put on our FFLIC t-shirts and walked around," Bervera said, "and it worked. I'll never forget finding my first grandmother." With the help of 40 volunteers in at least 15 states, FFLIC was eventually able to match every single one of the detained juveniles with their families and have them released into family custody.

With this "reunification" project underway, FFLIC sent out an e-mail to its friends and acquaintances asking for support. The staff relocated to Lake Charles, found office space—and then Hurricane Rita hit. Bervera remembers, "It was our next blow. Everyone was roaming Lake Charles in a daze, drinking FEMA water—but Lake Charles bounced back."

Soon, thanks to that early email, FFLIC started receiving donations, mostly from individuals, but also from the Twenty-first Century Fund. They raised over \$100,000. The funds were then split among the families in the program, allotted according to need. In the Lake Charles office there is a framed collage of the hand-written cards that came in with the donations.

In early November, Bervera recalls, "came the shock of 'Now what?' At least for the first few months we could raise money and disburse it to members." The organization became split geographically: with Lake Charles working on policy and a campaign on school discipline, it became a strong office.

In New Orleans, the staff talked about re-building. They realized that their context for organizing had shifted with the presence of the National Guard and the State Police. FFLIC continued monitoring juvenile detention, but also began looking more closely at police violence, working with the public defender's office and monitoring the re-vamping of the indigent defenders system. "There needs to be a public safety system that serves to keep people safe, not control populations," Bervera says.

The January after Katrina, Bervera and her staff felt hopeful. "We beat back demolishing public housing, and things were unformed," she says. Since then, however, things have changed in her view. "Right now the window has closed," Bervera says. "12 months after the storm, the city is in its 4th round of planning. It will take a serious opposition to make positive change."

Life post-Katrina: The challenges one year later "I am having a deep crisis of faith," Bervera says poignantly of her experiences one year later. "Some of us thought that Katrina would be like a light shining on what we've known for years – I thought that perhaps this was another 'Birmingham '63'. But it was only for a moment. In a painfully clear way, there was no national response. I guess the cavalry is not coming, whether it is the federal government or other progressive organizations." In particular, Bervera finds that there is a lack of regional understanding. "The South and the North are so separate," she says. "There needs to be a different way of dealing with the South."

Bervera also observes that the biggest challenge post-Katrina is with infrastructure: "What does it mean to have most of your staff lose their homes?" she asks. "We've had to forgo all our plans. People are tired [and] there are many mental health issues." She notes how many of her colleagues are suffering from depression and trauma and is astounded by what people outside of the Gulf don't know about the reality of life after the hurricanes. "It's worse than you think—and it keeps getting worse," she says. "It is so demoralizing."

"People need to hear that it's not 'ok' down here," Bervera pronounces. "A lot needs to happen: funders need to

invest, academics and organizers are all needed. It is an ongoing disaster, a national disaster. For people who care about human being in this country, if we loose New Orleans it's a huge blow... You can't have the largest displacement of black people and not have it have an effect."

On what has been hardest to deal with over the past year, Bervera is clear: "The most profound trauma was that the world could see and recognize that kind of racism and poverty and do nothing."

Even with these challenges before her, Bervera is determined to look toward the future. "[Our] membership might look different," she says. "It could be brothers and fathers whose sons have been gunned down. FFLIC has always been mothers and grandmothers, focused on boy kids. We need to get back to our core—perhaps look at the schools, where they are opening, which people are welcome home and [which are] not." She plans to stay in New Orleans to see out this mission because, "New Orleans captured my heart... The joy is intense here [but] the oppression is intense here. I can't say I am committed for 10 years, but I can't walk away. I spent 6 years building FFLIC; I feel I need to finish."

Bervera remains hopeful by reminding herself that "there were many 'Birmingham's' before 'Birmingham.' Our members are coming back—they are still wonderful human beings, and they keep coming to meetings. That is how the city will be saved, if it will be saved: families and kids doing things, not waiting for government. Sometimes you are in the desert for 120 years and you can't see the big picture. It is like Noah, building a boat."

On Katrina's disproportionate impact on women Bervera notes that Katrina has affected women and women of color more intensely than most. "Housing, education, criminal justice, jobs – these are all women's issues," she says. "The city feels very male right now; little industry and work exists for women."

Bervera is concerned that the city and HUD will demolish public housing; 200,000 blacks are not yet home and many of them are women who no longer have a place to live. The housing development where many FFLIC members lived was flooded above the 2nd floor; it is now surrounded by barbed wire with "no trespassing" signs everywhere. There is also no health care for the poor. "New Orleans had a high number of women headed households, a high level of poverty," Bervera points out. "They just got stuck here. It was women, it was mothers who were impacted."

Reflecting on her own experience, Bervera says, "Being a woman leader and mostly working with women members in a field dominated by men, I am struck that we never owned that women have paid the price for crime. If we're going to talk about public safety we need to talk about what it means to be safe for women, and address crimes against women."

Home is a place where you can rest "Home has a whole new meaning," Bervera says, "I used to think I could live anywhere, go from hotel to hotel. Now I know I can't."

"Home is a place where all my clothes and make-up are," she says jokingly. Then her voice turns serious, as she walks out the door. "Home," she says, "is a place where you can rest."

Ms. Foundation funding works to create positive programs for youth FFLIC plans to use their Ms. Foundation grant to refocus the government's funding policies away from detention centers and other policing mechanisms, and towards the creation of schools, services and programs. These will work to give youth the tools they need to empower themselves as opposed to leaving them victims of the Juvenile Justice system.

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