

KATRINA An Unnatural Disaster

Do You Know What It Means to Myth New Orleans?

by Katy Reckdahl

Callers to the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau don't know basic facts about post-Katrina New Orleans. "Do you have electricity yet?" they ask. "Is the water safe to drink? Will I get sick from breathing the air?" Others imply that there is still standing water in parts of the city.

"Progress has been slow, we would all agree. But there has been progress," says bureau spokeswoman Mary Beth Romig, who knows the hurricane's wrath first-hand. She lost her house in Lakeview, as did family members like her father, longtime New Orleans Saints announcer Jerry Romig.

A lot of Mary Beth Romig's callers should know better. They're news reporters, meeting planners, and potential tourists who may have been misled by network TV, which still airs archival footage from the hurricane's aftermath, when tree limbs blocked roads and floodwaters covered 80 percent of the city.

Everyday, callers ask for specific progress reports. Have the roads been repaired? Can I buy groceries in the city? In mid-June, the bureau was flooded with calls after the National Guard and its Humvees began patrolling the city at the request of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin. "Now people are wondering whether they're coming to a city that's the Wild Wild West, where people are gunning each other down in the streets," says Romig, who explains that the National Guard is deployed in less-populated neighborhoods, freeing up New Orleans police to concentrate on the city's hotspots.

The phone calls may illustrate a larger problem: the nation isn't getting an accurate picture of the city of New Orleans. Callers are not only misinformed; they're quick to jump to conclusions, says Romig. "Unfortunately," she says, "New Orleans is under a microscope right now, and whatever happens is taken as a sign that the city is not coming back."

But it's hard for the bureau to convey accurate information when many New Orleans tourists don't give a whit about city plans and Road Home money. "We did some research recently," says Romig, "and we found that people didn't want to hear the word 'rebirth' anymore. They wanted the old messages about New Orleans, the *laissez les bon temps rouler*." As a result,

the bureau moved to a more reassuring message that New Orleans is alive and thriving, where the hurricane in a glass receives more emphasis than the hurricanes in the Gulf.

The first seeds of misinformation took root right after Hurricane Katrina hit, says Lori Peek, a sociologist at Colorado State University and one of a handful of U. S. sociologists documenting the ongoing experiences of Katrina evacuees. Peek's specialty is disasters—specifically how disasters disproportionately affect poor people, partly because they lack the money to properly prepare or quickly recover.

When Peek teaches her Sociology of Disaster class, one of the first weeks is devoted to something called "disaster myth." A half-century of disaster research proves that the stereotypes are not true, she says. For instance, despite what you've seen in the movies, people don't panic. Most of the time, they react in a pretty orderly fashion. They don't get violent, and they don't focus on saving themselves. In fact, most of the rescues after any disaster are people saving others around them. Officials also act predictably, often overestimating the number of deaths and calling for martial law (which is usually unnecessary).

Peek can illustrate how disaster myth plays out again and again over time. For instance, after Katrina, it took nearly a month for anyone to question the news reporting. On Sept. 19, *The New York Times* published a piece by reporter David Carr called "More Horrible Than Truth: News Reports." Reporters had swallowed rumors and reported them as truth, Carr believed. "Many instances in the lurid libretto of widespread murder, carjacking, rape, and assaults that filled the airwaves and newspapers have yet to be established or proved, as far as anyone can determine," he wrote. "And many of the urban legends that sprang up—the systematic rape of children, the slitting of a 7-year-old's throat—so far seem to be just that."

Carr saw parallels to 9/11, which he had covered as a reporter. "People had seen unimaginable things, but a small percentage, many still covered in ash, told me tales that were worse than what actually happened," he wrote.

That's classic disaster myth, says Peek. What she calls "the Katrina narrative" was set not long after the hurricane hit the city. "Violence became such a big part of the Katrina story. We heard that people in New Orleans were dangerous, that they were killing each other in the convention center," she says. Peek also saw the TV footage of looters entering stores across the city, but she would argue that most of that activity was focused on survival, on people getting food and water.

During that first week, trained emergency management officials thought Katrina was an exception, she says. "They said, 'No, this one's different,' because it's a bunch of black poor people stuck in the Superdome, and they're going to loot and be violent."

Race-based rumor like this was common during the civil-rights era, says Joe Leonard Jr., head of the Washington, D.C.-based Black Leadership Forum, a coalition of 28 civil-rights groups. "During integration, there was often hysteria in the white community—'African Americans are buying up all the ice picks.'" That hysteria still crops up. "Remember *Do the Right Thing* in 1989? People believed that black people were going to mob after seeing this Spike Lee movie."

Somehow, the Katrina myths crossed racial lines. "This is the first time I know of that black people believed the hysteria," says Leonard. He recalls that on Thursday, he was in a meeting with all of the Black Leadership Forum organizations. They began taking calls from black Louisiana leaders, who were calling in on speaker phone, telling horrendous stories.

"People in the room were weeping," says Leonard. "Elected officials from Louisiana told us, 'The men are raping the women in the Superdome.' They were calling for martial law. And they were discussing gangs killing everybody they saw. Those are the same things that were being said in white conservative households uptown. I'm accustomed to it being said in those circles. I'm not accustomed to it being said in African-American circles. We believed the worst about ourselves."

Disaster myth has real consequences, says Peek. For instance, instead of simply sending food and water to those in the convention center, officials waited until those supplies could be escorted by soldiers with machine guns.

National Guard Lt. Col. Jacques Thibodeaux, who led the rescue mission into the convention center on Friday, recalls that the city had reported "lawlessness, no food and water, desperation." So the Guard assembled a force of 1,000 soldiers and 250 police officers, all armed. Behind that came 25 to 30 tractor-trailer trucks of food and MREs that had arrived that morning, driven in by National Guardsmen and FEMA contractors. At noon that day, the procession left the Dome, traveled a dozen blocks down Poydras Street, then turned right onto Convention Center Boulevard, not knowing what was ahead. "We were expecting a war zone," says Mark Smith, spokesman for the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

But as the soldiers turned the corner, the crowd cheered. Within 30 minutes, the place was secured. When the troops searched all 19,000 people for weapons, they found 13, says Thibodeaux. Numbers were similar at the Dome, he says, where they had searched 39,000 people as they entered, confiscating about 50 weapons. "That gives you an idea of the lawfulness of the crowd," he says. "We had people who were basically good people trapped in a bad situation."

Reports of mayhem and murder, however faulty, managed to stall aid to the unevacuated people in New Orleans. "That did absolutely, without a question, affect response," says Smith, the state Homeland Security spokesman. The official U.S. Senate report, *A Nation Still*

Unprepared, notes that FEMA drivers and vendors with vital supplies would not enter the city without military escorts.

Brian Greene, then-head of the region's Second Harvest Food Bank, was in constant contact with other food banks across the country, which were sending truckloads of water and food to Louisiana. Then the news stories about violence began, and he started getting calls from cross-country truck drivers. "They became afraid of Baton Rouge," he says. "You'd have a guy from Iowa who would enter Louisiana, go as far as Alexandria, but wouldn't go any further."

Once again, a textbook example of disaster myth, says Peek. And even though sociologists haven't documented anything called "rebuilding myth," she believes that the Katrina myth lives on. "What's the most recent national news about New Orleans? That five young men ended up dead in one night. The early narrative is extremely important because it shapes what stories will continue to be told."

Of course, myth is complicated by reality—these young men were brutally shot, says Peek. "But I think that the murders became national news because we were told early on that New Orleans is a violent place, that its people are dangerous. These murders fit that narrative, and that's why it became big news."

Warren Harrity has worked with large numbers of displaced people in Afghanistan and Bosnia. He's met families forced to leave homes where their forefathers lived for centuries, and people who fled villages bearing their family name. He sees parallels with residents of New Orleans, where extended families lived in the same neighborhoods for generations.

Harrity now heads up Katrina Aid Today, which provides case-management to Katrina evacuees across the country, using a consortium of nine nonprofit organizations assembled by the United Methodist Committee on Relief and \$66 million in funds donated to FEMA by foreign governments.

Currently, Harrity sees "a push-pull" among Katrina survivors. "The pull, of course, is home sweet home. The push not to go home is this year's hurricane season, it's the lack of affordable housing, it's the shortage of schools."

The organization's case managers found that they couldn't be effective advisors unless they had accurate facts about New Orleans. So, at the end of June, Katrina Aid Today sent a letter to all of its case managers, describing the difficulties still facing New Orleans residents.

A June 28, 2006 e-mail from FEMA's transitional recovery office in Austin, Texas, advises caseworkers that the purpose of the letter is to "build awareness in evacuees about certain lifestyle considerations—i.e. availability of childcare, grocery stores, medical clinics, etc.—that should be weighed before deciding to repatriate to New Orleans."

The letter devotes a paragraph to each topic. For instance, "Grocery and supermarkets have been slow to return to many neighborhoods. Sometimes there aren't enough residents back in your neighborhood for a store to open and be profitable. You may have to travel a large distance to groceries. Walking to the store may not be an option."

It also cautions those with allergies ("being in the city will only worsen your allergies"), those who require regular medical attention ("depending on your medical needs, you may have to drive across the river or even as far away as Baton Rouge"), and anyone who owns a car ("You may need to purchase a gas can in the event you cannot get gas near your home.").

"It's a very defeatist attitude," says Bill Quigley, who heads up the Gillis Long Poverty Law Clinic at Loyola University in New Orleans. The United Way sent a similar e-mail to its staff, he says. "It says that you are doing your people no favor by helping them get back to New Orleans," says Quigley. "They think that it will take three to seven years before people will be able to build a semi-normal life in this city."

Quigley believes that these warnings, which may be well-meaning, will discourage people from returning. Instead, he says these agencies should be helping people through these difficulties. "Right now, they're saying, 'There isn't an opportunity, and we're not in the business of providing an opportunity.' But if the government refuses to help the community of working people and renters and elderly, they won't be able to come back."

Elected officials look at people who don't return and think that they are "voting with their feet," that they don't want to come back, says Quigley. Instead, they should be helping evacuees plan for their return.

Sociologist Peek also believes that the letter takes a discouraging tone. "It feels like every paragraph ends with 'you may not be able to...,'" she says. "But it's a fine line." She has been talking with case managers in Denver, who are hearing from some evacuees that they want so badly to go home. But then they tell the story about a single mom with a 5-year-old who got back to New Orleans and called in a panic, saying "What am I going to do? There's nowhere to live, no school for my child?" So they helped her return to Denver. "Even if only one or two evacuees have had that experience, that shapes how you talk with other evacuees," says Peek. "But if the goal is to get people back to their homes, how can we take that frightening tone?"

Beth Butler believes the letter is not only frightening, it's untrue. Butler is a community organizer for New Orleans ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), which created the Katrina Survivors Network, an evacuee group that emphasizes evacuees' "right to return." Butler criticizes multiple parts of the letter, including the warning about lack of grocery stores. "The Lower Ninth Ward didn't have a supermarket before the storm," says Butler. "It had corner stores and, yes, they're more expensive, but they always were."

Not everyone sees the letter as discouraging. Even people living in New Orleans can't agree about what's accurate. Part of the difficulty is that the recovery varies widely from neighborhood to neighborhood and sometimes even from block to block.

The letter seems realistic, says Rafael Duboe, who owns Regal Automotive on St. Claude Avenue and agrees with the assertion that many mechanics are lagging a week or more. "Right now, I am behind," he says, looking at the row of cars outside his garage. Donald Mills used to run a car wash a block away, on St. Bernard Avenue. He sees "nothing inaccurate" in the Katrina Aid Today letter. "It's only an alert," he says. "It's telling people to stay on their toes." Antoinette Allen, who grew up nearby, stops to scan the letter as she runs into the corner store with her kids to get two cans of pork and beans and some hot dogs. Nothing wrong with that letter, she says. "They're just talking about what's really going on."

ACORN's Butler says the myths about New Orleans extend to its people. "Doesn't everyone from out of town think that everyone who was rescued from the roof in the Ninth Ward was poor, including Fats Domino?"

Butler felt belittled as an evacuee in Baton Rouge. "I kept saying we should print up T-shirts saying 'Ninth Ward Marauders,'" she says. "People saw the exaggerated news accounts and viewed people from New Orleans as criminals."

Early on, the general public wanted to make sure Katrina evacuees weren't getting handouts. Amy Liu, deputy director of the Brookings Institution, an independent research and policy institute, remembers being a guest on a National Public Radio call-in show in November. "Three callers in a row said, 'I don't understand why we have to give more money to these families,'" says Liu. "That sentiment was out there even three months after the storm." Liu says that Brookings has been careful to emphasize that many evacuees lost everything. "But people don't like money that has no incentives attached to it," she says.

Peek says people have formed an image of Katrina evacuees. Many Denver evacuees she interviews say, "I can't get a job because I'm from New Orleans." As a result, some job applicants have started lying about being from New Orleans in order to get hired.

That's because potential Denver employers assume that if someone is from New Orleans, they must be poor, they must be immoral, and they must be violent. After all, everyone heard how much poverty New Orleans has; they know that New Orleans is known for corruption, partying, drinking, and drugs; and they saw the news stories about violence. "It doesn't matter that those stories about violence were proven untrue," says Peek. "Because new employers and new neighbors only remember those negative stories."

Debunking these myths isn't simple, because there is some truth behind them. After all, New Orleans has problems with its schools, it elects dirty politicians, and its per capita murder rate is, and has been, extraordinarily high. So what is the line between ignoring the problems and

creating a stigma? "New Orleans has this spotlight," says Peek. "The challenge here is to figure out how to use this spotlight to repair some of the problems."

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