

RETURN TO LOUISIANA  
By Dr. Debra Holland

Last week, I returned to Houma, Louisiana, where I had done my mental health relief work after Hurricane Katrina. I flew out to speak at a writers' conference--the very conference I'd been booked for a year ago--and ultimately the reason for my choosing Houma as the site of my relief work.

When Katrina hit, the only person I knew (and who's email address I had) in the affected Gulf Coast States was Molly Bolden, owner of Bent Pages Bookstore, who had asked me to speak at the conference. In corresponding with Molly and her friend, writer J.C Wilder, they wrote of the devastation of the New Orleans area, and the lack of Red Cross presence in Houma. In desperate need of mental health workers, they begged me to fly out and help. So I did. I stayed in the home of Tom and Janice Loebel, a wonderful couple who took great care of me, and worked for the Red Cross in the shelters at Nicholls State University.

On this follow-up visit, I wanted to spend some non-stressful, quality time with all the friends I'd made during my two-week stay last fall. I also wanted to see for myself the damaged areas of New Orleans. When I was there before, New Orleans was still off limits to all but rescue workers and police. I'd heard many stories of people's experiences, and seen so much on the news, but I knew I needed to see the destruction for myself.

On the plane, I encountered a black woman, who told me that her home was destroyed by the flooding. She's currently staying with her son and doesn't know what will happen to her house. "But I'm still paying the mortgage," she told me, with a roll of her eyes and shrug of her shoulders.

From the air, I could see lots of roofs, or parts of roofs, covered with royal blue tarps. Blue roofs, they are called. I wondered if people lived in those homes, hoping the rains wouldn't bring more damage, or if they had to live elsewhere. Probably both.

Tom and Janice picked me up and took me to Lake View, a nice neighborhood where the 17<sup>th</sup> street levee had breached. In the months since Katrina, much of the debris had been carted away, but a lot remained. Blocks upon blocks of houses stood empty, like a modern day ghost town. The desolation continued for miles--far more than I'd ever realized possible. Empty windows and often doorways gaped, although some had been boarded up. It looked like a scene from a war zone.

Each house had an X spray-painted on the front. The numeral on the bottom of the X signified the number of bodies found. Luckily I only saw 0s. This is an affluent area. Everyone must have evacuated before the hurricane.

Most of the neighborhood consisted of brick houses, both one-story bungalows and two story mansions. Driving through, my heart ached for the losses so many had sustained. Where families had once lived, loved, and dreamed, there now existed only eerie emptiness. Weeds grew in each yard, about a foot or two high. Many trees survived, but other giants, uprooted, had smashed through the houses. No birds flew or perched anywhere in sight. No people, either. Once or twice, we saw workmen clearing a yard and waved encouragement as we drove by.

We bumped over the water-torn roads in Tom's jeep. Occasionally I saw "dead" cars--either right side up, on their sides, or upside down--or a boat carelessly tossed in a yard.

A few houses had white FEMA trailer parked in the driveways, and the owners had attempted to make a home, putting potted plants or lawn chairs near the doorway. Some homemade signs hung on the fronts of a couple trailers. "The Pit" read one. Here and there a house stood refurbished. A few of these showed signs of life. I couldn't understand how anyone could bear to live there, being the only family on the whole block or even several blocks--surrounded by ghost houses. Imagine the view from each window. It would take a certain kind of stubbornness and courage--or maybe just plain desperation to live in the sad silence.

And they might be rebuilding just to lose it all again. We drove past the levee, and despite attempts to repair the breach, a narrow stream of water trickled through the vacant dirt yards in front of it. The leak isn't entirely repaired.

Insurance has become a problem. The houses in this neighborhood won't be insured ever again. Even in Houma, which escaped hurricane and flood damage, insurance premiums have gone up. Tom and Janice expect their premiums to be even higher next year. Their insurance agent warned them to not let their current policy lapse, because they won't be able to get a new one.

As we drove through, I wondered where the former inhabitants now lived, and how they'd recovered, both emotionally and financially. What were their lives like? They'd lost so much, far more than I could even imagine. I'm sure they can't help being haunted by the home they'd left behind.

Later at dinner, Tom and Janice shared their concerns about the coming hurricane season. Tom explained how the ocean usually cools in the winter, lessening the probabilities of hurricanes. But because they'd had a mild winter, the ocean had only cooled 2 degrees, instead of the normal 15. Bad hurricanes are expected again, and everyone I spoke to expressed similar fears.

On Sunday, I went to brunch in the French Quarter. I was relieved to see this part of town looking the same as when I had visited in 2001. I ate a lovely meal at Muriel's on Jackson Square, then had my fortune told by a tarot reader. New Orleans as normal. 😊

Parts of New Orleans, such as the area around Harrah's, had been cleaned up and looked normal. Other parts of the city didn't seem very affected unless I looked closely, and saw every third or fourth business was still closed. Just outside the Garden District, we tried to track down my friends' favorite cafes/ice cream parlors but all were closed for another few months.

We also had a chance to drive through the Ninth Ward. Like Lake View, this was a ghost town, although the houses were mostly wooden and more run-down. In addition to the Xs, I saw messages spray-painted on the outside, detailing the sighting of pets. Sometimes the pets had been taken to animal shelters; other times, someone from ASPA had come by and fed them. It was horrible to think of what the animals had suffered.

We passed a housing project. A chain link fence surrounded dismal gray apartment buildings, surrounded by weeds, and I wondered if it would have looked more pleasant before Katrina.

I heard stories about how the inhabitants lamented their lost culture. Many families had lived in their houses or their neighborhoods for several generations. They knew when someone prepared gumbo, because the aroma would waft to the neighbors.

A gas station, run by a Middle Eastern couple, was one of the few businesses in the area that had reopened. On the outside, a sign thanked people for using their services. Other signs on the walls proclaimed that South Bell had abandoned them. Apparently the phone company has decided not to restore service.

I don't know what the solution is for New Orleans. Perhaps there isn't a solution. Nor do I know what it's like to live with the constant threat of hurricanes, how the fear must eat at each person's soul. However, the

human capacity for denial--the belief that it won't happen to me--is amazing. I live in earthquake country, so I know how easy it is to compartmentalize the idea of massive natural destruction.

For the rest of my visit, I savored the warmth of my friendships, and appreciated the people and places of Houma and New Orleans. I seemed to have a greater richness to all my experiences, a feeling of not taking them for granted. I knew I wanted to remember and appreciate every minute. And I did.

Then I returned to California and plunged into my busy life. Once again, I slipped back into taking things for granted. It's so hard to live in the moment, and always remember to cherish loved ones, including your pets. It's a goal, though. One I need to stop and remember more often.

Dr. Debra