

KATRINA DAYS: Life in New Orleans After Hurricane Katrina

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MY SMALL STORY

August 27, 2005: The night before my family and I evacuated to Houston, the Krewe of Oak was celebrating Mid-Summer Mardi Gras at the Maple Leaf Bar. Many, if not most, New Orleanians had already left the area and were in no mood to party but die-hards made their way to Oak Street for the annual celebration and a secondline parade.

August 28, 2005: Less than ten hours later it was abundantly clear we would have to leave. The cars had already been gassed up and the house secured. Trees had been trimmed and any potentially flying objects had been put away. What remained was a trip to my office on Oak Street just a block from the Mississippi River levee. Sarah's daughter, Dara, parked her car in my gated driveway. This was some of the highest ground in the city. They and Dara's 4-year old daughter, Anna, took off while I grabbed all my computers, locked up and headed west.

What's usually a six-hour drive to Houston became a 12-hour ride and we felt lucky for that as we arrived to open arms at the home of Sarah's cousin, Robert, and his wife Janice. This was a safe haven for us all with a swimming pool to boot. I am eternally grateful for the comfort and safety of their home during such a traumatic time.

Once the natural disaster was over, watching the manmade disasters unfold on television was, of course, excruciating. The feeling of helplessness was maddening. I so much wanted to be there, if not with a chainsaw in my hands to help in the cleanup, then with a camera to document the situation. It would be twenty days before my initial return and the pain never ended.

Despite feeling homeless and in a state of shock, I set up a temporary office in their living room and immediately set out to find as many of my friends and photographers from home as possible. I was serving as President of the New Orleans/Gulf South Chapter of the American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP) and was the "keeper of the list" of photographers in our region. Cell phones were still often useless but a great many folks were online. It was a big relief for so many of us to know that most folks were okay. It was the not knowing that scared us so.

Once we realized we would not be going home anytime soon, dear Sarah gathered all her mothering energy and with great fortitude and perseverance helped us make long-term plans. Her son, Aaron, Dara, and Anna would find shelter in Fayetteville, Arkansas while Sarah and I would fly to Montana in order to lean on friends there and attempt to recover from the trauma.

At the airport in Great Falls, Avis upgraded our vehicle to a new Cadillac, which was a blessing and a curse. Satellite radio allowed us to listen to countless disaster stories as we traveled through the most incredible scenery; truly a bizarre juxtaposition.

That first night, our hostess, Su, and husband, Thad, arranged for a free meal at the nicest restaurant in town. Little did we know that the manager had put a can near the front door with a sign taped to it

telling of George and Sarah's Katrina travails. Customers put \$63.85 in the can that night. I filled the rest of it with tears of gratitude and a heavy dose of humility.

The next morning we drove to the Bear Creek Guest Ranch where we stayed in a log cabin for five days. Rich Speidell and his kind family did their best to distract us from the torment at home.

Driving into Glacier National Park the American flag was at half-mast to honor the death of Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist as well as those who perished in Hurricane Katrina. Early snow made for an enchanting journey before returning to Houston.

I couldn't stand it any longer. Being away from home was unbearable. Sarah and I arranged to stay with my dear friend Phyllis Mayo in Baton Rouge. In the meantime, I arranged to get a press pass from another friend in the publishing business. This allowed us to travel in and out of Orleans Parish weeks before they officially reopened it to the public at large. Twenty days after the storm we ventured into the city for our first of several visits. We would have to leave each day before 6pm curfew.

The first stop was my office just off River Road on Oak Street. The gate lock had been broken and Dara's car stolen. I had been told the building was "intact", which was true. But it soon became obvious that the old asbestos shingles did not hold up in Katrina's winds. Rain that entered the roof filled the ceiling light fixtures. The kitchen ceiling had caved in and mold had taken over in the front office.

I was afraid to guess what might be the condition of the thirty years worth of negatives stored in the back office.

Twenty-five file boxes wrapped in trash bags had survived unscathed but I was an emotional wreck. After removing them from their vulnerable surroundings, I sat on the back steps and cried deeply for half an hour, releasing the depth of my trauma. It was as though everything I had not wanted to deal with before the storm was coming back at me like a giant wave. I felt slammed with pain, guilt, fear, anger, hurt, helplessness and a heavy dose of self-pity.

I think what saved me was the crying. I cried every day for weeks and then off and on for months. Every time I felt overwhelmed I would cry again, trying my best to release whatever emotion was filling me. Often I was crying not so much for myself but for the countless unknown people who couldn't or wouldn't cry for themselves; or for those who could not return to their homes or, worse yet, the over 1,600 people who couldn't or wouldn't evacuate and died. I cried for us all.

I never once thought about making photographs during that first trip back until shortly before curfew when I came upon the studio of my friend Ron Calamia. The old Coliseum movie theatre he and his partner had purchased was ripped up. It was very sad. Many months later, after over \$400,000 worth of repairs, it caught fire and was completely destroyed.

Sarah and I would stay in Baton Rouge at night and I or we would drive back into New Orleans every other day to check on things, explore the damage, and make photographs. Days later, the fourth-most intense Atlantic hurricane ever arrived in Louisiana near the Texas border. Rita killed seven people and created over \$11 billion in damage to the Gulf coast. The day before it made landfall, we drove back to Houston and were met by new hurricane evacuees in a house of fourteen people. It was then I decided I had to go home, even if power was not fully restored.

The reports of violence led me to consider that I might have to buy a gun if I were to return. This was the most difficult and frustrating decision I had to make during the entire experience. My passion for the city runs deep. To think that it and I were being threatened by opportunists infuriated me. I imagined potential confrontations in which I would have to kill someone. It was horrible and I was scared but I chose not to buy a gun. God bless the National Guard. I never wanted them to leave, even now.

I was determined to save our refrigerator. It's simply amazing how many maggots were feeding inside there. I cleaned it thoroughly at least four times and we still occasionally found maggots in our ice cubes months later. Gross, huh?! The fridge is still doing fine. But the smells I experienced during those early days after the storm will not soon be forgotten. Ask anyone. They'll tell you. And with so few people around, it felt like the wild west of yesteryear; eerie, strange, and, at times, primitively beautiful and peaceful. You could see the stars at night. And my experience of the land was wholly different from normal. It was raw and powerful; its presence more fully felt.

Without a job I was experiencing everything in new ways. My time was more my own as I explored the devastation. I was rarely able to photograph for more than a few hours without having to decompress. I usually wore an orange safety vest so that no one, especially the National Guard, would think I was up to no good. The photography work I was doing became very important to me. I knew it would help people understand and heal someday.

On those rare occasions when I entered someone's wrecked home I always asked for permission. I would stand before it, open my heart and mind, and ask if it was okay to enter. Only once or twice was the answer no. I walked with respect and responded to each situation with dignity. It made no sense to do otherwise, especially when the land and its people had already been so ravaged by wind and water.

A fine photographer from Santa Barbara, California, Larry Dale Gordon, contacted me looking for a photo assistant. In need of work, I took the job. I served as guide and liaison for several days on two separate occasions as we set up his 4x5 camera to photograph the scenes he wanted to include in a project he called "Shattered Dreams". Larry generously allowed me to photograph as we flew over the city in a helicopter. He deserves some of the responsibility for any success this body of work might receive.

Unable to return to my broken office, I worked out of the small one-car garage next door for a year before finding a small gallery space on what has become Main Street (Magazine Street). Business has been picking up. There is more hope now. It was a long time coming. Residents are working extremely hard to make things better. The government continues to support us more than we want to admit but we need that support and more. Only a relative handful of residents have returned to vast areas of the eastern part of the city. Blight could be a major problem for a decade or more. It will take time, patience, and great resilience.

America must learn from its mistakes and there were many after this storm. If we were just cleaning up after a hurricane we'd be done with it by now. But it was a massive failure by government at every level. The suffering continues and the problems run deep and wide. Some have even questioned the city's viability altogether but take a look and you'll see it's profoundly obvious that the will of its residents to rebuild and make this place whole again will not be swayed.

The will of our government is another matter. There is significant resistance to spending the money required to heal the wounds and create the groundwork for a future that does not allow this to happen again. Failing infrastructure, poor schools, deep poverty, the Diaspora, blame, resentment, racism, corruption, lack of vision, and fatigue; these are just a few of the complex and overlapping issues to be addressed if we are to proceed responsibly.

On August 1, 2007 I first presented my Katrina work in an exhibit at my gallery and called it “Blowing in the Wind”. Although a few images were hung on the walls inside the gallery, most were outside hanging from a series of clotheslines along a sixty-foot stretch of sidewalk down Magazine Street. Before we could get all of them glued to the line, a powerful rainstorm had the 11x14 laminated photographs blowing in the wind and covered with raindrops. When I saw them I knew that this was exactly the way they were meant to be seen and experienced. Jenelle Davis did a great job putting that display together.

At least one thousand people came to see the photographs during the five weeks it was first presented. The feedback was often the same: “You’ve got to do a book”. And so here it is. You can consider your purchase to be a contribution to my personal Katrina Recovery fund although it is not tax-deductible.

If you don’t already live here, I do hope you’ll come visit. This place has an authenticity not realized elsewhere. The river that runs through it, though polluted and under appreciated, carries with it a spirit that infiltrates all in its path. The city’s feminine energy and mysterious nature provide much opportunity for us to explore, in a creative way, the inner workings of the mind and spirit. One of the reasons why out of town celebrities feel so comfortable here is because everybody’s a celebrity here, so we just don’t pay them no mind.

This really is a fascinating place to live and work and play. If you come with the right attitude and contribute to its authenticity, you will be rewarded. If you don’t, you’re a hurtful opportunist and we don’t want you here.

Words fall short of any real explanation of why we choose to persevere under such trying circumstances but New Orleans is home and it’s worth fighting for.

So come on down and have some fun or help us fix this place. We need all the help we can get.

George Long
October 9, 2007