KATRINA THEN AND NOW

Residents

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She lived with her then 6-year-old daughter in the Ninth Ward, one of the low-lying, predominantly African-American areas hardest hit by the Category 5 storm that claimed 1,833 lives and left 705 people missing. The levees, built to contain a Category 3 hurricane, collapsed, and 80 percent of the city drowned under its enormity.

"I went back about a month after everything settled down. I cried because the neighborhood was a wreck. I mean, a wreck," she said. "The destruction seemed unreal. It looked like a bulldozer just came through and tore up everything in sight. There was nothing left to salvage. I broke down because I had a life in that place."

Richardson returned in 2011. "I was excited because downtown looked the same, if not better," she said. "You would have never guessed Katrina came through there. Then I got to the Ninth Ward and my heart just sank. It wasn't as bad as that first time, but it still looked like a hurricane had been through there. It made me cry."

She returned again in spring. "I was praying to see rebuilt houses, more families – signs that real change had been made. But I saw only a little. Not enough. So many houses are just ruined and still ruined. But in other places in New Orleans, places that were hit just as hard, you can never tell anything happened."

Richardson is not alone in her observations. A wide gap exists along racial lines about attitudes regarding New Orleans' recovery, according to a survey by Louisiana State University, with 41 percent of whites said living in New Orleans improved since the hurricane clean up, while less than 20 percent of African-Americans feel things are better.

'We are unique'

"We don't talk the way anybody else talks, we don't dance the way anybody else [dances]," Landrieu said while touring Atlanta. "They don't eat the way we eat. They don't hug the way we hug. They don't love the [same] way. It's just different. And it's wonderful. I love Houston. Houston's one of the great cities in the world. I love Atlanta. But you know what? New Orleans does not want to be Houston or Atlanta. What we want to be is the best version of our real selves, because we are unique."

Unique does not mean better for many Africa-Americans living in the Ninth Ward, where homeowners either walked away from their destroyed properties or relocated to Houston, Atlanta and other cities. Many failed to receive enough insurance money, if any, to repair the vast destruction.

The city did receive $70 billion in federal aid for $150 billion in damages, but a tour of the city revealed what neighborhoods were left on the sidelines.

"When you have that kind of gap [in monetary aid]," Landrieu conceded, "not everyone gets everything all the time."

The mayor pointed to the refurbishing of the Mercedes Benz Super Dome – where 30,000 mostly African-Americans endured six days of unseemly conditions as the city drowned – and the many rebuilt neighborhoods and the overall growth in population of the city as evidence of progress.

"Y'all can come on home," Landrieu said while touring Houston.

"But come home to what?" Anderson asked. "New Orleans is in my heart, in my blood. That will never change. But it's not like it was the best place for jobs before the hurricane. And with our neighborhoods – not to say that we have to live where we always lived – but our neighborhoods just haven't gotten the attention it deserves."

Joe Louis Ruffin Urban News Service

Floodwaters drowned parts of New Orleans 10 years ago after Hurrican Katrina hit.

New Orleans will make headlines again during the 10th-year anniversary. President Obama plans a visit and so does former President George W. Bush, who was roundly criticized by many, including filmmaker Spike Lee, whose 2007 documentary on the aftermath of Katrina, When The Levees Broke, won two Emmys.

On his tour, in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Landrieu called New Orleans "one of the world's most remarkable stories of tragedy and triumph, resurrection and redemption."

New Orleans will celebrate the city's rebirth on the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina with parades featuring Mardi Gras Indians, and brass bands marching through Uptown and downtown New Orleans on Aug. 29. The event is promoted as the Katrina 10 Commemorative Parade, created to be "a cultural showcase that celebrates New Orleans, its resilience and the incredible spirit of its people," said Flozell Daniels Jr., president and CEO of the Foundation for Louisiana.

But many on the eastside and in the Ninth Ward will not see reason to celebrate. They are still drowning in tears.

File Photos

Louisiana evacuee Rendell Bartholomew steps off the supply bus that returned to Winston-Salem from Baton Rogue, Louisiana. He was the only evacuee who took volunteers up on a trip out of the Gulf Coast after they dropped off supplies. He was met by his brother-in-law, who drove him to Virginia to stay with family.

Charity

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ty of war zones, but I think this was worse than that," he said.

The rescue and relief efforts of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were widely critiqued as being inadequate. The difficulty in getting relief to those struck by Katrina inspired some Winston-Salem residents to make their own relief trips to the Gulf Coast. The weekend after Katrina hit, the local black community filled a bus with supplies, which attempted to go to the Big Easy. It made it as far a Baton Rogue, where it was able to give its supplies to a shelter.

Mendez said the response was "negligent" and showed a "lack of caring" for the largely black population that had been stranded in New Orleans.

"One of the things that Katrina woke the nation up to was the fact that people actually lived and suffered and were impoverished in this country," he said.

Mendez said that his trip let him know what help was needed, such as water, first aid and volunteers for both the cleanup and the massive rebuilding efforts. He said many churches helped in the effort. The Ministers Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity helped with relief and also protested the response to Katrina.

Though the federal response did have difficulties, like in every storm, it did help many when they needed it. The North Carolina-1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team (NC-1 DMAT), comprised of 35 members, including doctors, paramedics and other medical specialists, helped at Gulfport Memorial Hospital, which was facing a surge of patients and operating on generator power after Katrina hit Gulfport, Mississippi. The team, made of medical professionals from around the area who are called up to respond to emergencies, set up five tents that acted as a completely self-sufficient overflow emergency room with its own generator power. The team saw 1,200 patients in 10 days.

"We saw a lot patients and did a lot of good," said Elizabeth Newsome, NC1-DMAT team commander.

DMAT teams were under FEMA at the time and are now under the Department of Health and Human Services. Newsome said that there have been many lessons learned and improvements made in emergency response since then. DMAT teams now respond faster and have more efficient tailored responses to disasters.

One thing that made Katrina unique was the 1 million Gulf Coast residents displaced by the disaster that dispersed across the nation. FEMA sent some evacuees to other states. None where sent to the Triad, but many ended up there on their own. More than 500 evacuees came to Winston-Salem.

Susan Smith, Red Cross of Western North Carolina senior disaster program manager, said some came because they had friends or families in the area. Others were familiar with or had been to North Carolina before or heard the area was a good place for evacuees.

They often came with only what they could fit in their car or carry on a bus. To help evacuees, Winston-Salem created Project Welcome. Evacuees were directed to head to the Red Cross location on Coliseum Drive, where they would be evaluated and connected with needed resources.

Smith said Red Cross offices across the country were working overtime. Locally, volunteers where being trained and mobilized to not just to go to the Gulf Coast to do relief work, but to also respond to the flow of evacuees.

She said some evacuees stayed only until they were given the OK to go back and check on their homes. Others stayed months or years, some even relocating to the area. Regardless, the needs they had when they came required a multitude of agencies working together to help them.

"It was caring hands and hearts coming together and really embracing these evacuees," said Smith.

One of those agencies was Experiment in Self-Reliance, which found housing for evacuees. ESR Executive Director Twana Wellman-Roebuck said ESR regularly finds housing for those in need, so it used its resources and relationships with landlords to help. She got daily updates via phone from FEMA on its housing efforts.

A bus filled with supplies leaves from Winston-Salem for the Gulf Coast the weekend after Hurricane Katrina hit. The trip was organized by a variety or organizations and leaders in the local black community.

"Sometimes the rules you had heard the day before, the next day had changed or there was an update to it," she said.

She said that there were weekly meetings between the different local agencies involved, constantly finding ways to improve things, like bringing in pastors to minister to the emotional and spiritual needs of evacuees. She said the community really pulled together to help the displaced Gulf Coast residents.

"That was just an impressive time," she said.

Mayor Allen Joines said that overall, Winston-Salem really rose to the challenge in helping those struck by Katrina.

"I was pretty proud of the way our citizens, our businesses, our churches and others organizations stepped up," he said.

Mendez said that he felt disaster response had gotten better under the current U.S. administration. One thing that hasn't gotten better is the poverty that left many vulnerable and disadvantaged when disaster struck.

"The issue of poverty has to be addressed to avoid these kinds of crises in the future because they will happen again," he said.