

Merry Christmas and Happy Hanukkah!

Front Page

www.frontpagenews.com

December 23, 2005

Volume 26, Number 26

Serving the Carolinas For Over 25 Years!

Gay Life in New Orleans After Katrina

Gayest Neighborhoods Spared; Lesbians and Blacks Hit Harder

By Rex Wockner
Contributing Writer

NEW ORLEANS — A few Christian political activists blamed Hurricane Katrina on gays, noting that it hit immediately prior to gay-friendly New Orleans' famed "Southern Decadence" gay festival.

But, in fact, about the only parts of the city that weren't severely damaged by the massive flooding from burst levees were the gayest areas. And the New Orleans gay scene appears to be bouncing back faster than the city in general.

"The 20 percent of the city that was spared, 80 percent of those parts of the city are gay [neighborhoods]," said Larry Bagneris, executive director of the New Orleans Human Relations Commission. "The benefits of living in that environment — the French Quarter, the Marigny, the Bywater, Uptown — where most gay people live, they were spared the water. We've come back not only to dry land, but to our jobs.

"All those preachers who blamed the



The Bourbon Pub is up and running, but tourists are not coming, as available hotel rooms are limited. Many locals have failed to return to the city.

gay community for Katrina — our neighborhoods were the ones that had the rainbow over us and were blessed," Bagneris said.

But many gay people didn't live in those gayest neighborhoods — especial-

ly lesbians, blacks and men who don't frequent gay bars.

"The flooding hit a lot of the community that is less visible than the bar crowd," said Randal Beach, co-chair of the Lesbian and Gay Community Center of New Orleans. "A lot of the people whose social activities revolve around the bar scene live in and around the French Quarter, and they were fortunately spared the flooding. But many others in the community — particularly the women's and trans[gender] communities — lived in areas that were badly flooded. New Orleans also has a large black community, and the overwhelming majority those people lived in neighborhoods that were severely damaged."

Former city Health Department director and well-known French Quarter figure Dr. Brobson Lutz agreed that "gay people of color were more prone to live in areas that were more susceptible to the flooding."

Lesbians took a harder hit, Bagneris said, because "more lesbians lived in [the flooded] Mid-City and Lakeview [areas], and many have kids that have to go to school."

Most schools have not reopened, which prevents people with school-aged children from coming home, even if they have a home to come home to, which most evacuees do not.

The city's lesbian population is likely to remain depleted for some time, said Belinda Hernandez, an openly gay executive producer at WDSU-TV.

"A lot of the lesbian population relocated — and we don't even know where they are," she said. "Lakeview is gone. Much of Mid-City was under water as well."

Gay Community Center Threatened with Collapse

The fact that most evacuees still haven't been able to come home also has thrown the Lesbian and Gay Community Center into dire financial straits. It may, in fact, have to close if help doesn't arrive soon.

"It's devastating," Beach said. "We have met several times trying to figure out how to keep the doors open. The base of our support has always been in the community itself, we've never had a lot of corporate support, [and] many of our heavy donors are scattered around the country. Many we haven't been able to talk to. We don't even know where they went."

"Also, it's hard to ask people for money when they don't even have a house," he said.

The center has 100 to 150 core donors but has been able to contact "no more than half a dozen of them," Beach said.

The all-volunteer facility, located in the unflooded Faubourg Marigny neighborhood, operates on \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year. If 2,500 people from the gay community around the country

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Belinda Hernandez (l) and Brobson Lutz.



Photos by Rex

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