

HURRICANE KATRINA: A DECADE LATER

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ALLISON PLYER

A Cautious Recovery

10 Years After Katrina, New Orleans Is Vibrant But Wary

BY CHRIS ADAMS

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NEW ORLEANS — David Herzenberg is back in the city he once called home — back to the place that is blighted and dysfunctional and infuriating yet at the same time magical and musical and wonderfully distinctive.

Ten years ago, Hurricane Katrina swamped New Orleans and surrounding areas and forced away hundreds of thousands of residents, Herzenberg among them. Over the resulting decade, he went to Norfolk, Va.; and Charleston, S.C.; and Tacoma, Wash.

He is now hard at work in the Upper Ninth Ward, one of the neighborhoods hit hard when Katrina came ashore and the city's levees failed, flooding 80 percent of New Orleans — with some neighborhoods under 10 or more feet of water. Although precise numbers aren't available, at least 986 Louisiana residents died from drowning, injuries, heart conditions and other causes, nearly half of them 75 or older. More than 1 million people from the region were displaced — sometimes for weeks or months as they decided whether they could salvage their moldy, water-logged homes.

And while the most prominent images of Katrina were from New Orleans, the storm zone was far wider: From suburban areas such as St. Bernard Parish that were also inundated, to Mississippi, where the storm surge simply flattened coastal homes.

But today, in New Orleans, Herzenberg is back, as is the city around him.

For evidence you can ask the mayor, Mitch Landrieu, who talks of an “ascendant city” that has come back unevenly but has basically come back everywhere.

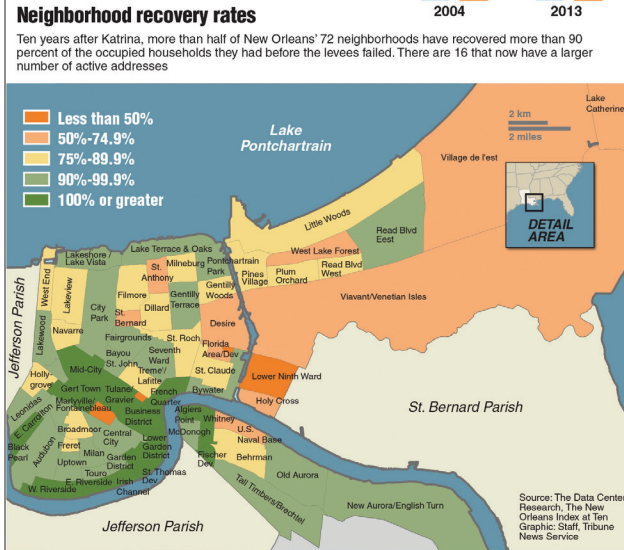
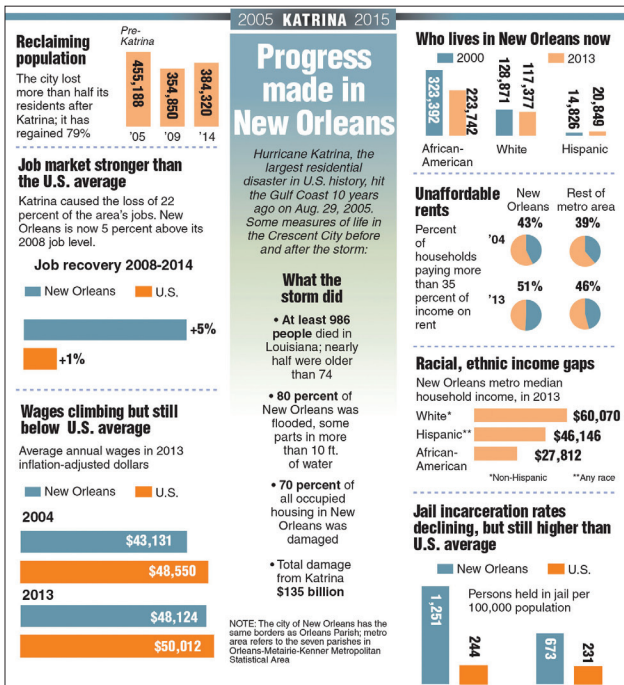
“You see kind of a mish-mash,” he said in an interview at City Hall, down the street from two of the iconic images of Katrina destruction: the Superdome-turned-evacuation center and the Hyatt Regency hotel with its blown-out windows. “It's not really a tale of two cities. Most of the city — in most of the neighborhoods — is moving back in the right direction.”

You can ask health, education, demographic and economic experts. They regularly catalog the progress the city has made, while also documenting some of the very serious problems that remain. Some of those are because of Katrina, but many existed long before the storm chugged its way across the Gulf of Mexico.

Or you can ask the residents. They live in neighborhoods pockmarked with poverty and still-abandoned properties; they drive over cracked, warped and potholed streets to get to their homes.

But for many, it was a choice they made.

“Initially, I didn't think I was coming back,” Herzenberg said on a sweltering August day as he oversaw a small crew of workers on the corner of Alvar and North Derbigny streets. His neighborhood contains both the famed, colorful houses of the post-Katrina



Musicians' Village and other, still vacant ones.

Herzenberg evacuated the city Sunday, Aug. 28, 2005, one day before the storm's Monday landfall. He left behind a Mid-City neighborhood and a home he sold during his post-Katrina, cross-country wanderings.

But New Orleans pulled on him, as it often does, and he choose to buy, rehab and move into the Ninth Ward — historically one of the city's most-troubled areas. The house he bought was never completely rehabbed after the storm; the outside structure is sound, but inside there's nothing but framing for walls yet to go up.

Herzenberg began his rehab project in June. He hopes that he and his 8-year-old son will be able to move in this October.

He has also started a carpentry business in the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the hardest-hit parts of the city.

“You're talking to somebody who couldn't have loved another city more than this one,” he said. “And sentimental crap aside, I also think it's a fantastic opportunity — a great investment. If I could find 10 more houses in this area, I'd buy them in a heartbeat.”

“It's taken me 10 years to get back,” he said. “But I am.”

The rest of the city is, too — sort of.

Drive around today and you'll find those cracked streets and abandoned houses and vacant properties. Those things existed before Katrina, meaning the storm is only partly responsible for the decay still very much evident.

The Data Center, a research center that has exhaustively chronicled New Orleans' rebirth, notes that the city's poverty rate has risen to pre-Katrina levels “and is now a crushing high 27 percent.” Violent crime rates are still roughly double national averages, despite a reduction from pre-Katrina levels.

Like the rest of the country, the city is also contending with the hangover of the Great Recession, which officially lasted from December 2007 to June 2009 — coming right as the New Orleans' economy was regaining its footing. The economy stalled here, as it did everywhere, but since then measures of job growth and business startups show an entrepreneurial spirit alive and well.

“Katrina was a major force in New Orleans, but it was not the only force,” said Allison Plyer, executive director of The Data Center. “The city was and it is growing much more strongly than it did pre-Katrina. We had a weak economy, pre-Katrina. The city was losing population. The region had very slow population growth. And now the economy is very strong — much stronger than the nation. So our economy was weak compared to the nation pre-Katrina, and now it's strong compared to the nation.”

From his vantage point on the 34th floor of a downtown building, Michael Hecht leads the development group Greater New Orleans Inc. and is prepared with a list of economic accolades that show the city's high rankings in start-ups per capita, education reform, favorable business



DAVID PURDY/BILOXI SUN HERALD/TNS

In nearby St. Louis, Mississippi, Charles Gray navigates his way across the large pile of debris which used to be his home on Washington Street on Dec. 13, 2005. Gray was watching the Army Corps of Engineers clear the pile in hopes of spotting some of his belongings he lost when the home collapsed on Aug. 29, 2005, in Hurricane Katrina.

climate and a host of other measures.

Looking out his windows, he can literally see the growth — where crisp and brightly colored housing developments, medical centers and retail operations spring from what once was New Orleans' decay.

“Katrina turned everybody into an entrepreneur,” he said, adding: “There is something going on here with entrepreneurship. It's not just marketing hype.”

Overall, the city has regained 79 percent of its pre-Katrina population. The census stood at 485,000 in 2000, dropped to an estimated 230,000 in 2006, and was back to 384,000 by 2014, according to the Data Center. The broader metropolitan area is back to 93 percent of its pre-Katrina, 2000 population of 1.3 million people.

But concerns remain — and among the biggest are those levees and flood walls that bracket canals throughout the city.

It was those levees and walls that failed. They have since been fortified by \$14.5 billion in federal and state money, and experts say the protection they provide is substantially stronger than it was. But the city needs to be vigilant about maintaining the system.

Asked if she was confident about the levee flood walls that tower above her backyard, Juanita Doyle — who lives in the Lakeview section of New Orleans — said: “Do I get to laugh?”

Elsewhere, in the shadow of the London Avenue Canal levee, Sidney St. Martin remains optimistic about the town he was forced to

temporarily leave. But he remains wary about the flood wall directly behind his Warrington Drive home.

St. Martin's house was five down from the London Avenue Canal breach; it was pushed off its slab. His family had left town the day before the storm and ended up living in Jackson, Miss., for four years.

For three of those years, St. Martin and his wife debated whether to come home. He had a good education job in Jackson.

“But I was never happy,” St. Martin said.

And he had a deep connection to his hometown; his mother was even director of the city's sewerage and water board, which worked to drain the flood waters from New Orleans. During his exile in Jackson, St. Martin drove home — about three hours each way — every two or three weeks.

He had been one of those men who never cried, he said. But he cried about what had become of his home and his hometown.

Eventually, St. Martin and his wife rebuilt their home and moved back.

Warrington Drive is still incomplete. Vacant, overgrown lots compete with empty Katrina-damaged homes as well as those that have been rebuilt. On the corner of Warrington and Mirabeau Avenue, a plaque commemorates the levee breach. A few house up, an open-air display shows images of the flood and diagrams of the levee failures; the Levee Exhibit Hall and Garden, as it's called, is run by an organization dedicated to educating the public

about Katrina.

St. Martin has a small role in the endeavor: One night a week, he waters the exhibit's flower garden.

As for the repaired levee walls looming behind him: “Am I confident? No,” he said. “If they broke, would I be surprised? No.”

But he deals with it. It's a small price to pay for coming home.

“You fight the devil you know,” St. Martin said. “California, you have earthquakes. The Midwest, tornadoes. At least with hurricanes, you have a few days to leave.”

Asked if he thought his fellow citizens actually would leave if and when the next big storm approaches, Landrieu, the mayor, said he feels good they would. Even so, he acknowledges the tight spot he's in.

“If you don't sound an alarm, people say you didn't warn them,” said Landrieu, who was lieutenant governor when Katrina hit and who comes from a prominent New Orleans political family (his father Moon was a former mayor and U.S. Cabinet official; his sister Mary was in the U.S. Senate). “If you sound it too much, they say, ‘I won't listen to you.’”

He also feels good about his city's prospects — despite readily acknowledging the problems that remain.

“You cannot reconstruct a complete city that's been destroyed in 10 years,” he said. “Even though, aspirationally, you would hope that you can do that, it just really, really, really takes a while to build a city that's going to stand for the ages.”

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