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## Letters from **New Orleans**

by *Julie Condy*

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*March 14, 2006*

Approximately 6½ months post-Katrina

Dear Hildy:

You caught me at a good moment. How is life here? Not dull, that is certainly for sure.

Here's an update:

It's six months after the storm and this coming weekend we finally (!) have found someone to demolish the deck behind our house in Covington that was decked (yuck, yuck) by 4 pine trees. The pine trees fell from the neighbor's yard on an angle into our backyard and missed hitting the house by 3 inches (yes, merely 3 inches). Our next door neighbor was not so lucky - a pine tree fell through the attic into the living room.

This past weekend, my husband, Stephen, and I returned to my family home with a van to haul what's left over to our house in Covington. Of the furniture, I was able to save one vintage bookcase and one chair that had been in the flood. There were a few smaller pieces in the attic that were OK, and we brought those back. But imagine out of a house full of furniture, only two pieces were salvageable! China and pots were OK, as well as my dad's coin collection. My great aunt's silver was a little rusty and will take a little work to restore. Lots of other stuff we will just toss, or rather let the demolition squad do their thing.

The neighborhood looks so very sad. All the manicured lawns have been taken over by tall weeds. Sunflower seeds found their way into the yard and are blooming. The funniest thing - two tomato plants self-seeded. It's somehow fitting to go into the backyard and pick a couple of cherry tomatoes amid the devastation.

Professionally, my life is returning. The New Orleans Opera held a fantastic gala with Placido Domingo as headliner. There were 10 big name singers, all of whom donated their services for the evening. The reunion of all us volunteer choristers was poignant. Many have lost their homes and/or their livelihoods, from teachers to doctors. Quite a few traveled from Baton Rouge (over an hour away) or further, and a couple came from other states so they could bring opera back to the city. The mood after the concert was amazing. Life was normal again, if only for a little while.

That was Saturday, March 4. The high lasted just a few days. On Wednesday, I ran into a friend who was selling the stuff she'd had in storage before moving permanently to San Diego. She hadn't seen the devastation in St. Bernard and in the 9th Ward, so I offered to drive her through the area.

I'm glad I did it, but I can't do that any more. It's just too very hard. It simply goes on for miles unceasingly. We spoke with a couple of men in St. Bernard who were renovating their houses, living in FEMA trailers. They both had gone through Hurricane Betsy in the 60's. They both said this was the last time they would rebuild. I broke down in tears after that. Just sobbing. And the tears didn't stop the rest of the day. We drove through part of the 9th Ward where there were no more houses, as they had been pushed off their foundations and ended up blocks away. Horrifying.

I had been to that part of town in November with a nonprofit colleague who had lost 5 relatives in that neighborhood. At that time, a large part of the 9th Ward was not open.

They were still finding bodies. Now 6 months later, there are still nearly 2,000 people missing.

Since January I've been teaching a day and a half a week at St. Anthony, a parochial school on Canal St. near the Cemeteries (yes, the same cemeteries mentioned in "A Streetcar Named Desire"). My family, including my parents, are buried in one of those cemeteries. While there was at least 3 to 4 feet of water in them, their tombs were OK, just a little muddy. But other cemeteries outside New Orleans were not so lucky. One of the major recovery efforts has been to identify disinterred caskets.

Sorry, I got sidetracked. Anyway, back to the subject of teaching. The church is in Mid-City, the neighborhood I grew up in until I was 8 years old and my family moved to the suburbs. When I started teaching in January, it still looked like a ghost town. Two months later, there is more activity but not enough. There are maybe 5 houses on a block with activity. The rest just sit. This is an area with lots of rental property that was either under-insured or not insured at all. It will be difficult for many of these landlords to rehabilitate their property.

A new concern is that only a few people will renovate their houses on any given block. What happens then to the neighborhood with all of the abandoned houses? This is a concern throughout the area. With 80% of the housing stock severely damaged or destroyed, that's an awful lot of houses - 10's of thousands.

The marina and wonderful seafood restaurants in the West End area on Lake Ponchartrain are ALL GONE. Nothing left of any of the restaurants except pilings in the lake. At the marina, boats are still willy-nilly everywhere. The blocks of boathouses along the lake were all destroyed. Some of the owners had a sense of humor: One had a sign "For Sale, Cheap, Free Sun Roof" (the roof was gone!).

So my newest decision is that I can only drive through the parts of the city that I have to. I can drive through Mid-City and enjoy what little progress I see. I don't need to drive through Lakeview, New Orleans East, Gentilly, the 9th Ward or St. Bernard, so for now, I just won't. It is so very hard to see your home, your favorite place in the world, destroyed. It doesn't get easier.

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As for the nonprofit sector, the world is topsy turvy. Obviously, funding is a big issue. Where will we find local donors who actually have money to donate to a cause other than Katrina? United Way donations since Katrina are down over 50%.

Local foundations are being challenged as well. Most are changing their priorities, so some potential funding has ceased until new guidelines are determined. I understand that major funders are interested in aiding the area, however they are waiting until there is one accountable authority in place. These are truly uncharted waters. No other area has had this type of total social devastation in the US of A.

But funding is just part of it. For many of us, it wasn't just our buildings, but our organizational structure that was destroyed. How effective can board members be when they, too, have lost everything, just like their constituents? The board president of Stage to Stage\* will be resigning due to family and job pressures. Her husband has taken ill. Her elderly mother was evacuated to North Carolina where she is now in a retirement home. Her home has significant damage, and her car was totaled by a fallen tree. Her job as cultural attache for the French Consulate has taken on new significance, as each month a major French dignitary comes to visit New Orleans, a former colony. How will we find new board members whose time is not being taken up by survival?

Another challenge is that even if you have funding, who is there to do the work? So very many people have been displaced. Many want to return but there is nowhere to live. Rents have skyrocketed. A one-bedroom apartment which may have gone for \$600 pre-K (pre-Katrina) is now renting for \$900 +. And that is cheap! There is much gouging going on, and nothing being done about it. I have a friend who returned in December to her job, but she is still homeless. She has gone from friend to friend and is now in a sub-let for another month. She just can't afford the rents.

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As for the government's response, it has been disheartening. Every member of Congress needs to see this destruction first hand. No one can begin to imagine the extent of the damage across the entire coast of Louisiana, and extending through Mississippi to Alabama. The citizens of this region are American citizens and deserve every opportunity to see their lives get back to where they were before the storms.

I'm glad people are reading my letters. The reality is much starker than the picture many Americans are seeing on the news. Of course, because New Orleans wants people to come visit to help boost the economy, I think perhaps the picture of recovery portrayed in the media is much rosier than the truth. If you were to come down here, you would be astonished. There are the "Isles of Denial", the parts of the city that were not flooded, then there is the 80% that was flooded. Even the areas that have been "cleaned up" still have a desolate feel. Can you imagine how grim things were 6 months ago???

The bright shining light in all of this has been the tremendous volunteer effort that is continuing. Many college students and religious groups are helping rehabilitate properties and lives. The school I teach at was flooded throughout the ground floor; a Catholic parish from Indiana adopted the school, putting in 6,000 volunteer hours to bring it back, to be able to open in January. These types of efforts are happening all over. There is a commune-type community (the Common Ground) that is helping in the 9th Ward. The college students are sleeping in tents amid the destruction. That was one of the sights that made me cry. People from all over want to help out, like your friend and his family \* . This is the kind of help that gives New Orleanians and other Gulf Coast residents hope. Other Americans really do care that we recover.

We who have been impacted are not in a good way. We are so damaged that in many ways, we are no help to each other. Everyone here has had some type of loss, and it is difficult to get through. Those who didn't lose a house or a loved one, feel survivor's guilt. My dreams were doing better until I took that devastating trip last week; now the nightmares have returned. It is six months later; we are trying to move on, but it is not easy when there is still no clear direction for the future.

But the one thing that did remain in Pandora's box is hope. Thank God we have that hope. We won't give it up.

So I suppose it will be two steps forward and one step backward for a long time. And yet, this is a visceral time. Everyone here is genuinely engaged in living. No more auto pilot. Everything you do, everything you experience and feel, you do on a more intense level. Life here is very real. I can't imagine living anywhere else.

I hope that gives you a better picture of what's going on now. It's been helpful for me to write these e-mails to you. Good to put this down in words.

The best,  
Julie

\* Note: Hildy's friend, Bill Arnold, and his family spent their Christmas holidays helping in New Orleans. "Our kids have everything they could possibly need. We thought it would be a good way to spend the holiday by giving something to folks who need it a lot more than we do." You can see the photos Bill's family took [HERE](#)

*To assist with the ongoing needs of victims of Hurricane Katrina,  [CLICK](#)*

*To make a donation directly to Stage-to-Stage, the organization Julie founded,  [CLICK](#)*



