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## Letters from **New Orleans**

by *Julie Condy*

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*Early October, 2005*

(approximately 6 weeks Post-Katrina)

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Dear Hildy:

Thanks for your e-mail. My family is fine. Actually I'm the one with the worst damage. Water up to the windowsills in the house for 2 weeks. Yuck! The family heirlooms just fell to pieces. I won't go there alone - too dangerous for a slip-and-fall, and it really does hurt to see your childhood home turned into a shambles.

It has been heartwarming to know that so many people have been praying for us. The worst is not over, just the flood waters. Imagine the most dysfunctional family you know, having just gone through the most trying time imaginable, attempting to reinvent itself, by itself, with no cash flow. That's New Orleans right now. Prayers will be needed for a long, long time.

What makes New Orleans different from so many places in the U.S. is that our population is not transient. The people of New Orleans, both black and white, have been here for generations. (In fact, the urban planner said that 80% of the population was native!) Leaving to take refuge with family elsewhere was not possible for many of us. Our family is not elsewhere. It is here.

We love our city. It is a very large part of our personal identity, and our culture is part of our everyday life.

In fact I just came from a small meeting of grassroots nonprofits. Our meeting was at Café Reconcile, a nonprofit restaurant training program, and they served red beans with French bread since it's a Monday in New Orleans. For those not well-versed in New Orleans cuisine, red beans and rice is the traditional dish served on Mondays in New Orleans. It stems from bygone days when Monday was wash day, and the moms would put a pot of beans on the fire and let them cook down while they were doing the wash. And nobody makes beans quite like "yo Mamma!"

You see, this is why New Orleans is so very special. We New Orleanians have stories like that for everything! I'm a 5th generation New Orleanian; it's in my very bones.

To be a New Orleanian is to have a well-developed sense of place, both in where you want to be and in the knowledge of where you fit in and belong. For the artists of New Orleans, this disaster has brought unfathomable loss. New Orleans is so unique and we are so proud of her. Now we collectively grieve her loss (the tears are starting to flow as I write this).

The vast neighborhoods which flooded for two weeks or more were the homes of all classes - poor, middle and wealthy. Many large extended families lived for generations in the same neighborhoods. This is the real New Orleans.

And the Stage-to-Stage kids came from all of those areas. One family's home was right where the Industrial Canal levee broke in the 9th Ward. I doubt they have anything left. Those houses were pulverized.

When the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities surveyed arts groups in New Orleans, the form asked, **If you had one story to share with the President's Committee to illustrate the impact of the hurricane on your program and the challenges your program and the children you work with face, what would it be?**

One story to describe the impact?

Our kids are GONE! Their families are GONE! Our audience is GONE! Our way of life is GONE!

For the thousands of families who have lived here for generations - lived in the same neighborhoods for generations - all of it is gone. Nearly everywhere where we had memories is gone. Destroyed.

Such destruction is hard to explain. The locals who have just returned had seen it in the media but the full force did not register until we saw it up close. Most of the links that make us human and give us a sense of belonging have been damaged or destroyed, whether it is a person (family and friends are dispersed, networks broken, life-long neighbors never to be neighbors again) a place (a home, a favorite restaurant, museum, garden) or thing (your stuff, your personal history drowned and destroyed in the brackish toxic sludge).

The short version of the story does not do justice to the long version. And EVERYONE in New Orleans has a long version.

Fortunately, I wasn't stuck on the roof (two of my neighbors were), nor did I get bussed out (I left Sunday morning). I took the dog but not the three cats. The younger two lived on top of the china cabinet for two weeks. We rescued them when we could finally get back in 2 weeks later. The 18-year old couldn't climb high enough. We found her body on the living room floor.

We had to sneak into the city to rescue the cats. The word on the street was that it was easy to get in via River Road. So that's what we did. Just some really bored Guard teens with M-16's waving people through.

There was literally no one on the streets - neither man nor vehicle. The only other cars we saw were military. This previously bustling metropolis was totally empty - devoid of people. Actually devoid of life. Those first few weeks there were no birds, no bugs. Nothing. Just a putrid smell everywhere and absolute silence and stillness, occasionally interrupted by the whir of a Chinook helicopter. No automobile sounds, no sirens, no ship horns from the Mississippi. Nothing.

The devastation is vast. My home and the entire neighborhood will be a bulldoze project. The water sat for nearly two weeks in our homes, and now the damage is floor to ceiling, wall to wall. The floor is warped in some places up to four inches. Ceilings are ready to cave in from roof damage and now from the mold. Sheetrock walls are buckling. Any walls we neglected to spray with bleach now have mold flowers up to the ceilings.

On Sunday, October 9, four of us went to my old family home to remove obstacles. Doesn't that sound strange - "obstacles" in your home? But the furniture had moved around so much that you couldn't navigate easily to retrieve what little was left. And it was dangerous for a slip-and-fall. Now my living room and dining room is out on the street in pieces. The books are a mountain of muck. (Thirty years of collecting music, gone with the water.) When they moved the family heirloom dining table, it fell apart in a cloud of mildew. At least now we have a "staging area" to move the salvageable stuff to.

There is an immense set of new vocabulary words in everyday use on the Gulf Coast. Staging area. Mold remediation. Landline. Bulldoze / doze as in "Just doze the joint." Black Hawk and Chinook (still regular sights). MRE's. "Don't loot or I'll shoot" (yes, for real).

The survey from the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities asked this question: **What is your short-term approach or plan for getting back in business, building back up to your pre-hurricane levels, or dealing with the influx of young**

**evacuees?**

The truth? The short-term approach has been avoidance. I can only cope with so much at once. First it was the hurricane, then the exile, finally the return to nothing, no home, no job, no relationships. Now it is time for personal recovery, which is tedious and miserable. Little of value is not covered in muck. And no one is here.

There is joy, though. My boyfriend asked me to marry him while we were evacuated in Mississippi. We decided to get married in Las Vegas, as all the churches I have worked in most recently were badly damaged. And frankly none of my friends are here.

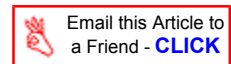
I'll leave you with one of the most bizarre and profound nightmares (I have a different one every night.) Remember, I'm a classically trained singer who works with children in musical theater. OK, so I was standing at my family tomb in the Greenwood Cemetery (one of those referred to at the end of the streetcar line named "Cemeteries"). I was using it as the most logical podium for conducting. Everything was white and gray - the usual color of cemeteries in New Orleans - and now grey is also the color of all of the lawns. The tomb is not one of those really tall ones - it is built up about three feet from the ground. I was standing next to a granite angel in memory of a young cousin who died years ago at age 7. My choir was made up of the recently deceased children from New Orleans. We sang together the most splendid version of "Adestes Fideles" in Latin under a gray cloudy sky. They angelically sang one entire verse with the refrain in impeccable Latin. I was so proud of my kids. The audience (angels maybe??) didn't applaud but sent out their pleasure through a feeling of immense joy.

I will write more soon. For now, I need to get back to work on insurance stuff. Do you know anything about filing for business interruption claims?

Julie

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