A Katrina Trilogy: Estrangement, Empowerment, and Social Justice

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This narrative chronicles the journey of three African-American faculty members in New Orleans, Louisiana. The first author details her experience as an evacuee to her birthplace in Southwest Louisiana, where she returns as a faculty member working with students in an evacuee shelter. The second author records her experiences of viewing the disaster from Michigan and tells of her desire to help in the recovery of her University where she feels invisible. The third author, having come of age in a segregated south, experiences a déjà vu of structural racism. All three women were empowered by their collective action.

Rebecca Chaisson, Ph.D.

Introduction

On August 27, 2005, I stayed up until 3:00 a.m. packing for what I felt would be a savage storm, unprecedented in the history of New Orleans. Am I a soothsayer? The national hurricane center and the national weather service predicted that Katrina would reach New Orleans with unrelenting fury and potentially catastrophic results. While my family slept, I listened to the mayor of New Orleans who seemed ambivalent about calling for a mandatory evacuation. I misjudged this ambivalence thinking that he didn't want to be responsible for having to move so many of the "deserving poor" out of the city. Months later, I learned that he was more concerned about the legal ramifications of ordering tourists out of the city away from their paid night's stay at numerous local hotels. I then understood the New Orleans moniker: "The City that Care Forgot," as I watched our elected officials making slipshod arrangements to implement an evacuation.

The all-night watchfulness preceded a seven-and-a-half hour trip some 125 miles away from New Orleans to southwest Louisiana where I was to live for the next five months. I had no idea that we would be gone for so long and that I would re-experience the racially segregated community that I had left when I was seventeen years old. At the same time, I was unaware of the drama unfolding in the lives of two colleagues who had been my mentors and friends, and who teach at the same historically White institution in the South. We were culturally therapeutic for each other as we often swam in unknown and sometimes uncharted waters. I also did not recognize the extent of both the trauma and lessons learned as we returned to New Orleans in January to begin our work in the School of Social Work. Eight months later, we continue to reflect on our lives as academicians, professional social workers, and "women of the storm." We also felt strengthened by our insider-outsider viewpoints on life in the University and community.

This narrative, therefore, tells the stories of three female African-American faculty members who evacuated and returned to New Orleans, forever changed by breached levees, flooded homes, closed gates, and silenced voices. Although the images captured during the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina were taken by man, they were available courtesy of Mother Nature and exposed the lives of poor Black women. This story also tells about critical events during the evacuation and return to New Orleans where, in our numbness and trauma, we emerged speaking out as a collective—spinning projects with group force. Each unique narrative is linked not just by our association as faculty members in the same School of Social Work, but by our responses to the painful discourse and dissociation that accompanies the lives of Black people in the United States.

The first narrative describes the experience of one faculty member who was

the liaison with MSW student evacuees working with evacuees at a Red Cross shelter. The story tells of the liaison experience, student responses, and the supervisor's struggle with old wounds from a segregated South. The second narrative tells of a faculty member who evacuated to the North with her daughter, observed the devastation of New Orleans through the media, and subsequently began working to respond to the rebuilding and renewal efforts. Despite the perceived "we shall overcome" tone of renewal, this account chronicles episodes of invisibility and silencing that were magnified (fueled) by the media's images of Black people as central characters in a story. The attempted exploitation of knowledge from Black scholars for the service of White scholars is also examined.

The third story gives a brief account of "evidence based experience" as a central concept that relies on the knowledge of a faculty member who "came of age" in a segregated South. She was the "First Black" in several "White only" institutions including the "welfare department" in her community in Mississippi. She highlights events that demonstrate the familiar and painfully challenging workspace that is more often marred by the forces of institutional racism. She speaks of her disengagement with conduct that is common in universities and, at the same time, represents the privileged communication and behavior often enjoyed by our academic institutions (Chaisson, 2003).

These accounts trace each person's experience which serves as a catalyst for a collective dialogue that empowers each individual as well as the group. The collective activity that emerges from recounting the individual narrative fortifies and informs a battle cry specifically against research that exploits the experiences of vulnerable populations. The collective work also retextures the individual story while developing a cultural "restory" for the evacuation-and-return experience of Black academicians in an historically White environment (Schroeder, Chaisson, & Pogue, 2005). The narrative thus shares how the "restory" acts as a foundation for collective empowerment and how reflecting on individual and collective experiences challenges social work in numerous practice areas including education, research, and social justice.

The Evacuee Supervisor and Student Interns

In September 2005, I was assigned to work as liaison between the University and the field office with three students who were Hurricane Katrina evacuees from our School of Social Work. Two students worked in the Red Cross Shelter for most of the semester while the third student worked for a few days in the large evacuation shelter. She then evacuated to Colorado because her parents wanted her to take MSW courses outside Louisiana. Two of the students were from the local community while the third student was from the midwest. The student from the midwest had just returned from a University-sponsored trip to India as part of her MSW course work. I did not see the students for nearly two months because of the impact of Hurricane Rita (a second evacuation for this author) and because of general logistical issues related to the linkages among the University, the School of Social Work, and the faculty, students, and staff.

I met two of the students in late October. They had been working for two months without a faculty liaison from the University. They had both been attending courses at a local social work program that had agreed to give our faculty and students residence there for the semester. I met the third student in late November as she had completed her course work in Colorado.

The two students who remained in this mid-size city in southwest Louisiana first worked in a large special event's dome, similar to the Superdome in New Orleans. Shortly after the evacuation from New Orleans, they began volunteering at a shelter that eventually turned into their field internship experience. They described a once-in-a -lifetime experience, watching many agencies work with evacuees in attempts to provide shelter, comfort, and service. During this period and in this location, the Red Cross, Volunteers of America, Substance Abuse Mental Health Administration, the State Office of Mental

Health, and other agencies provided services to evacuees.

My first in-person contact with the students was on site at the second Red Cross shelter which was considered a "last chance" shelter. We had the first supervision discussion on a bench on the campus of the shelter which had at one time been a middle school. The students were eager to make contact for this internship. When I finally began the liaison activity with these two students, it was clear that they were flooded with emotions. One of the students was tearful, expressing sadness and powerlessness as they worked tirelessly in the Red Cross shelter. The other student also had similar levels of frustration. She had just returned from an international experience in India where she had experienced third-world poverty. This student had also worked as a Peace Corps volunteer and thus shared a global perspective. The students had no guidelines or criteria with which to evaluate their performance. Because of the evacuation, they had not completed any of the routine forms that outline learning goals and outcomes. Both students had worked and lived in New Orleans, so they were more familiar with the New Orleans population than any of the Red Cross staff. They both struggled with the lack of resources for evacuees, who were now displaced, especially the most vulnerable and fragile ones. They were attempting to understand the Red Cross model of practice. When I appeared on the scene, the Red Cross supervisor was glad to meet the University's link to their organization.

The two-month interval between my own evacuation and the evacuation of the interns would become a temporal predictor for many services in the post-Katrina era. It was as if the rushing floodwaters had pushed needs in "fast forward," while services, similar to receding water, were stagnant and sometimes trickling in slow motion.

The liaison work—which quickly turned to off-site supervision—began to help the students focus on what they had done that was fruitful with the evacuees. They were also asked about their own evacuee experiences. Their trauma experience seemed minimum, particularly in comparison to the evacuees who were being served in this "last chance" shelter. One of the students felt some guilt about having made it through Katrina with almost no damage to her personal and family property. She struggled with the pain of watching the remaining evacuees, most of whom were African-American males, being marginalized and castigated by those groups who were there to help them. The two students who were White suggested that they received minimum supervision from the on-site Red Cross supervisor, who was African-American. After meeting with the students together and then separately, I met with their on-site supervisor who by all indications was overwhelmed with the numerous obligations of the Red Cross. The students and supervisor introduced me to many other professionals from across the country, some of whom were social workers. Without exception, the supervisor and other workers indicated that the students were doing an excellent job, working tirelessly and doing whatever they were asked to do and more as needed by clients.

During this first contact, I went into the shelter. At first, I felt uncomfortable and sad, seeing the large number of mostly Black male evacuees in a shelter with cots lined up, practically wall to wall. Male and female evacuees were in the same room during the day; there were about eighty beds, making the room seem like a large dormitory for the homeless. A few evacuees appeared disoriented; others seemed to be mentally detached. The evacuees were either near their beds or walking around the large room which had been a gymnasium converted for the emergency. I was surprised and disappointed at the armed guards at the entrance, which seemed to convert the gym into a prison.

On the other hand, with so many organizations being involved, there was some hope that evacuees in the shelter would be helped, especially when I saw many social workers from New Orleans (evacuees) who had been hired immediately by the local social service agencies that were serving the more vulnerable evacuees. At the time, I did not think about how traumatized my colleagues were as the delight in seeing familiar faces who had survived overshadowed any ideas of trauma

related to our own evacuation and relocation experiences. In fact, most of the social workers to whom I spoke in the shelter lost their homes since they, too, were located in the eastern part of New Orleans, which had been flooded with six to ten feet of water. One social worker had been rescued by a helicopter as she and an elderly uncle were stranded in a hotel room in the eastern part of the city. There were so many stories to be told with so little time for social workers to care for themselves. Despite their own experiences, I was reassured by the presence of these social workers who interacted often with the student workers, and I believed that the students would have appropriate on-site modeling even though these seasoned social workers were themselves constantly redefining their work in this new area of practice.

After that initial meeting with students and the visit to the shelter, I scheduled regular, as–needed contact with the students, and worked to bring some of their classroom experience and new information to their work. The teaching opportunity was challenging as students were asked to think about some of the courses that they had already taken so that they could apply knowledge gained from the classroom to their internship. One student felt that she could apply what she had learned from the internship experience in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina. She reflected on the quality of supervision in that internship and the quality of supervision given by the Red Cross supervisor. I reviewed with them crisis theory, trauma theory, and grief work. I also provided information about responses to disaster as a way to assist the students in examining their own experiences while working to apply knowledge about clients to their work. The students seemed to absorb the information and appeared less distressed. Then one day in late November, the Red Cross social work supervisor asked them not to return to the shelter. They called to tell me that they had been asked not to return and that they were troubled by the events of the day. They wanted to meet urgently. We met at 7:00 p.m. that evening at a local coffee shop, which is where their supervision took place when we were not at the shelter.

This urgent meeting included my three year old who was in tow. The students were cheered by his presence and demonstrated their own resourcefulness as they shared a coloring book and crayons with him. In their work at the shelter and in the community, they had been working with children who had been impacted by the hurricanes. Although I was aware of that work, I was able to see first hand how sensitive and responsive they were, given their own immediate concerns. He responded quickly, entertaining and engaging them as they tried to entertain and engage him.

I quickly learned from the students that they were feeling outraged by the humiliating behavior of their Red Cross supervisor: one day they were told they were great, and the next day they were told not to return. They had learned that the supervisor had said disparaging things about them to some of their colleagues at the shelter. The students said that they had been working with the evacuees to help them organize around a cultural event or ritual that was unique to New Orleans. They had done so in an effort to assist the evacuees by linking them to their cultural heritage while organizing them as a group. The two students had placed a flyer about the cultural event, with the permission of the on-site supervisor. They were shocked that the supervisor criticized them for this activity. The two students were appalled and wanted to report the worker to the State Licensing Board for lack of professional ethics. They felt betrayed and humiliated. They were concerned that their reputation was now tainted while their history of good work with this supervisor, as well as with other members of the service community, was being eroded. Clearly the intensity of their disappointment and hurt shaded their experience.

It was somewhat challenging to explain to the students why and how the behavior displayed by this worker, who was not licensed in the State of Louisiana, would probably not mean much to the State licensing board during this post–Katrina crisis period. We discussed their disappointment with the supervisor, in the context of disaster response, and the culture and structure of the Red Cross as an organization. Although this supervisor (through

hearsay) clearly violated professional conduct, it was difficult to assess what had really occurred without speaking to her. I assured the students that I would discuss the matter with the on-site supervisor in order to understand this sudden change and that I was confident that from all reports up to now they were doing a great job at the shelter.

The next morning, I had a meeting with the supervisor who told me that the students were asked to leave for their own safety and that the evacuees in the shelter were thought to be dangerous. She suggested that the Red Cross had sent in another administrator who had experience working with these "tough" cases of evacuees who were criminals, drug addicts, or both. The supervisor said that the students had done a great job but that they were always talking to the evacuees in the shelter space and that the population of evacuees was taking advantage of these "neophyte" social work students. The Red Cross supervisor told me that they had also asked the other social service agencies to stop coming to assist the evacuees. She said that the last day for the evacuees was near and that there was fear of potential uprising and violence as the evacuees knew that they had only a few days remaining in this shelter. They were just protecting the students, other workers, and themselves.

Both students struggled with the injustice that was evident during their work with the most vulnerable evacuees. So did I. These outcast evacuees were predominantly African-American and male, some mentally ill, some substance abusers, and all unwanted by a community that seemed to always manage a smile for everyone else. This set of evacuees was removed and sent to trailers, with accompanying armed guards and local media coverage. The only difference between these homeless evacuees and many of our own families is that we hold and sometimes conceal and treat our mentally ill, addicted, and suffering members. At times, we too may want them evicted but something always gets in our way, some would say enabling, others would say trying to "Save our Private Ryan" who often struggled to stay alive in a war whose weapons are illiteracy, red-lined neighborhoods, incarceration, plentiful drug supplies, and pay day loans. Somehow, the plight of these leftover African-American men made the evacuation experience in many different ways painful to watch. They seem to be awaiting rescue. But, there would be no helicopter, no boat, just an outstretched hand that would quickly be withdrawn.

I remember how I had felt welcome in a superficial way by the hometown that I had grown up in. The place was segregated when I left to enter college at seventeen. Now returning to my birthplace stirred up memories of intolerance, hypocrisy, fear, and social injustice as I thought about the functionally segregated churches and neighborhoods that still exist.

The experience with these students taught me about the resourcefulness of students, the blurring of professional boundaries during such a disaster, and the mandate for social work education to promote social justice publicly. Some of the challenges with field placement discord remain. However, the trauma of disaster intensifies and reshapes social work practice. The field unit at the School of Social Work had to shift to different and varied types of internship experiences given the dislocation of both students and liaison. The liaison had to shift with unknown and rapidly changing organizational policies and practices. The students had to shift continuously, and the learning opportunity was not a learning community but a bureaucratic organization where top-down decisions were made without concern about notifying a University School of Social Work.

Most importantly to the mission of social work are the clients—particularly marginalized individuals and groups. If the poor and disenfranchised are poor in one community, in all probability this marginalized population will not only transfer to another community but disenfranchisement will be intensified especially during a disaster. The poor and marginalized in this community were seen as "dangerous and un–appreciative evacuees." Sightings of "unappreciative evacuees" have been reported in all states that took in evacuees. Although there may be evidence of individually morally challenged evacuees (such as the family that

sold a house that was given to them by a church), most evacuees from New Orleans struggle to fit in and risk being hidden just so that the public can keep them invisible.

This same struggle existed in New Orleans before hurricane Katrina ever entered the Atlantic Ocean. All of these residents had connection in their lives. Some were temporary workers; others were parking lot attendants, hotel workers, fast food workers and other minimum–wage job earners. Most tourists who love New Orleans enjoy the community because of the hard work of this marginalized population that kept the city afloat.

On January 2, 2006, I was back in New Orleans. A week later, at the time of the first faculty meeting in a post-Katrina New Orleans, I remember feeling relieved that all of the members of the faculty and staff were alive, given the extent of destruction associated with Hurricane Katrina. I also felt blessed and lucky that our house had been spared the wrath of the broken levee system and was therefore livable enough to offer others a place and space to lay their heads. The feelings of excitement, relief, and blessing soon turned to disappointment as I continued to hear about all of the changes in the University where the anointed and appointed leaders were male and White. Why did I feel such blooming disappointment? Was it my own desire to have skin color and gender privilege, or was it that familiar feeling of a kind of silent and always culturally private violation evolving from the devaluation of women of color? Had they not heard of White privilege or gender privilege? Was this action of preferential treatment for White men a signal for the reinvention of affirmative action? I was feeling what I imagined the Social Work field students felt when they were asked not to come back to the shelter.

Reflections on Empowered Collaboration

The seminal event tied to Hurricane Katrina that transformed my professional life was the public display of multitudes of poor Black people at the New Orleans Superdome, the convention center, and the federal Interstate highway in New Orleans. This once invisible group of working poor and disenfranchised individuals was exposed and sensationally exploited for a compelling story that provoked sympathy for the plight of poor and marginalized individuals. This exploitation of the images of poor Black people is similar to the attempted exploitation by researchers throughout the United States who descended upon New Orleans post-Katrina with an eye and an ear for collecting facts and data from local Black faculty in order to inform exclusive research agenda. Thus, the generally invisible status held by Black faculty at the University was reversed for the convenience of well funded researchers who wanted to meet with us, talk with us, and get us to help them conduct research about Black people in New Orleans. The parallel experiences of convenient visibility, and more often invisibility of minority academics fighting their individual battles for professional recognition and respect, are reminiscent of the plight of those Black individuals who did not evacuate, yet fought to be rescued. The accompanying feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and frustration provoke not just a level of empathy but unwanted insight into structural racism.

This parallel process drove the transformation that has led to an empowered collaboration among the Black faculty in the School of Social Work. Though my colleagues and I enjoy a collegial, personal, and professional relationship, we had not had such a sustained, focused, and productive effort as we have had post-Hurricane Katrina. My reflections on the genesis of this empowered collaboration begin with the events that occurred shortly after Katrina made landfall.

In the days after the levees broke in New Orleans I, along with the nation and the world, watched in horror as the waters of Lake Pontchartrain, levee breaches, and other Mississippi river outlets filled the below–sea–level city. The television screens were filled with the thousands of mostly Black faces who desperately spoke out and reached out for rescue, often pleading for someone to save them from the deadly waters. My amazement grew as I listened as news commentators began to sensationalize these images of poor Black children, the elderly, and families in the

context of third-world poverty. How could the same media that report on the status of Louisiana and New Orleans as having the lowest educational achievement, highest child poverty ratings, high infant mortality, and other unfavorable national risk factors, feign shock at the people who make up these statistics? How could the majority members of a resource-rich society not know that pockets of desperate poverty exist within the borders of the United States?

In the immediate aftermath of the catastrophic devastation along the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina, there was an outpouring of compassion. Individuals, agencies, corporations, social groups, schools, universities, and governments of foreign countries all lined up to help individuals and families impacted by this storm. As I closely watched these developments from the safety of my family's home where my child and I evacuated, I began mentally to prepare myself for a return to the city that at minimum would require hard work and unknown stamina. But I stood ready.

Each day I read the daily updates on the University's emergency web site filled with the President's clear determination to have the school up and running by January 2006. The hurricane hit on Monday, August 29, 2005. The levees broke on Tuesday. My monthly paycheck was due Wednesday, August 31. As I anxiously watched these events unfold I assumed there would be no payroll that day. I have direct deposit into my credit union. Normally, I check to insure that my check has been deposited. In those tumultuous days of the breaking news and events it didn't occur to me that I would be paid. It wasn't until I was making plans to get a train ticket headed north and away from the devastation that I discovered that my paycheck had been deposited. I was amazed and thankful. This began my commitment to the University president. I attributed this marvel of technology to him. I later learned that my payment was due to the normal processing of these checks days before the storm hit and that the subsequent appearances of my monthly paycheck were directly tied to management by the University president. Because of his leadership and determination he assured us that for the entire fall semester while we were evacuated, full-time faculty members were to be paid. As I thought more about the monthly paycheck, I was reminded that most working poor live from paycheck to paycheck. A disaster of this magnitude happening at the end of the month just before pay day for some folks would certainly disadvantage a large number of people.

In those first days and weeks after the levees broke and the faculty and students scattered around the country, it became urgent to find out news of each other's personal safety and evacuation status. I anxiously checked the University website for news of my colleagues. This survivor web site included a link for "signing in" and reporting your contact information. I diligently did this but heard from none of the faculty. I awaited word about expectations for faculty. I finally found the temporary email address of one of my colleagues. He had been in touch with our Dean and updated me on all the news of other colleagues. Now connected, I read the daily updates from the Dean about the developing efforts. In one urgent email the Dean informed us of the President's request for all departments to present a report as to how they could help with the renewal effort. Written between the lines was the urgent message for the need to justify the existence of our school and the relevance in a post-Katrina world. I immediately sat down and outlined a two-page description of all the ways our School of Social Work would be critical to any rebuilding plan. I forwarded these ideas to the faculty. No mention was made of my ideas. I had received several notes from colleagues applauding my ideas so I knew the email had gone through. I felt invisible. In January at the first faculty meeting, I read the final proposal submitted to the president. I did not see any of the ideas I proposed in October. This was another experience of academic invisibility.

Part of the effort of the University to resurrect itself from the debris and devastation of Hurricane Katrina, was a commitment to help rebuild the larger community of New Orleans. The University is the largest private employer in the city with a substantial number

of people of color—particularly Blacks—employed at the staff and service levels. Finding housing, schools, and health care services for staff and faculty was critical to the planned reopening of the University by January. The University President filled the news media as he criss-crossed the country securing commitments and doing the necessary work in order to develop a viable plan of renewal.

One well-publicized effort was the creation of collaboration among three of the local universities. A kind of academic, arms linked together, "we shall overcome" approach was the premise of this historically White university with two private historically Black universities (HBCUs) in New Orleans. All three universities were damaged by the storm, but both of the HBCUs were severely damaged with catastrophic losses. All three presidents were determined and committed to re-open their doors as soon as possible.

When the University re-opened in January, a large celebratory event was planned. Wynton Marsalis, a native New Orleanian and scion of one of the first families of music, gave a brilliant and inspired talk and an astounding musical performance that left all in the packed auditorium moved to tears. Newly returned students and faculty felt the electric charge that rebuilding was possible and the city would come back. The presidents of the two historically Black universities were present on stage, I thought, as a way to demonstrate and talk about this bold new urban partnership. The two presidents of the HBCUs sat silently on stage. The University president acknowledged their presence in his opening remarks but their voices were never heard by the audience and national media. They were visible but discounted. It was easier to use the voice of a local musician than respected academic leaders from the Black community who struggled to return and reopen despite a greater percentage of damage to their campuses. More importantly, the announcement of the partnership between these two historically Black institutions not only lacked credibility at that moment but served to define the relationship between this historically White institution, the Black musical community, and the presidents of HBCUs.

The common thread with all of these selections was the absence of people of color. In retrospect, these announcements may have been the other catalyst to action. Without any conscious agenda, the Black faculty quietly connected with each other after the first faculty meeting and agreed to meet the following day. At that meeting we all found that we shared a common outrage about the series of post-Katrina events that felt like a return to the racial *status quo*. We shared our individual observations that built on this theme. I shared my observation that at the celebratory event, the face of leadership on the stage orchestrating this event was a White male, front and center, a Black musician, and two Black presidents silently "waiting by the door."

As we processed the fast-breaking events and various efforts at rebuilding and renewal, another fact became evident. None of the Black faculty had been approached by either the local administration or any outside media or person to help with the rebuilding efforts. Despite the national prominence of each of us individually with publications and work specifically dealing with the African-American experience, poverty, and mental health, and despite the mission of the School of Social Work focusing on poverty and oppressed minority populations, none of us had been contacted for participation in the renewal plan. We had the collective epiphany that we are invisible.

Out of this ugly realization came our commitment to work together collectively to address this invisibility constructively. We began meeting every week and worked as a collective force. We all agreed to defy the attempts of outside researchers, investigating the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, who tried to distill knowledge from us without inviting us as colleagues. We wrote a concept paper for the Institute for the Study of Race and Poverty. Through our persistence as a collective, a member of our team was selected for the directorship of this Institute. We are writing papers, presenting together at national conferences, and using a number of strategies to make ourselves visible and heard in our

workplace. One of these concrete outcomes is the joint development and authorship of a manuscript on a "*theory of invisibility*."

This experience has given us new insight into the everyday lives of Black, poor people. We have a renewed appreciation for Black men who stand out on the corner and even hip-hop artists who tell their stories through rap and song. From this series of events inspired by Hurricane Katrina came a change in how we operate as academicians. We made decisions to be strategic as a team, lest we be ignored or attacked as individuals.

Business as Usual

This reflection begins after we returned to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Each of us had a different experience during the evacuation process but the seminal event occurred upon our return to New Orleans. At our first faculty meeting, we discussed the renewal of the University. An important component of the transformation of Tulane was the collaboration between our historically White institution and two private historically Black universities (HBCUs). Our University presented in its renewal plan an administrative chart that included each university. However, key administrators could not answer any specific questions about the relationship. They could not name persons from each university who would be involved in the collaborative. As we continued the discussion, it became clear that the partnership among our University and the HBCUs was an afterthought, and there were no plans to involve these universities in significant ways. In essence, it was clear that this collaborative would be more of the same in terms of how predominantly White universities work with Black universities.

After the faculty meeting, I asked Black faculty members to meet for a few minutes. My intent was for us to check in with each other to see how we were doing after the hurricane. I knew that each of us had suffered some impact of the hurricane, including damage to our homes, moving in with relatives, uprooting children, and moving in with and caring for aging parents. Once we had checked in with each other, our conversation turned to the faculty meeting. It became increasingly clear that each of us had some strong emotional reaction as a result of the meeting. At that moment we decided to meet on a regular basis.

For me, the overriding theme was "more of the same." I was frustrated and keenly aware that even in the midst of such a horrific disaster, it was business as usual in terms of race relations. We assumed that the hurricane became the leveler that made us all equal. However, as soon as the boat stopped, we recognized that our experiences differed and that the boat let some out on the plank, threw some overboard, and kept others on for extended time.

I evacuated to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, which is located approximately 100 miles from the Mississippi Gulf Coast and New Orleans. Hattiesburg suffered extensive damage from the hurricane. The city did not have electricity or telephone contact for at least a week. And, as with this kind of situation, services were restored in phases. The house where I lived did not have electricity for about two weeks; telephone service was not restored until November 17, 2005. We did not use battery-powered radio because we wanted to save the batteries as long as we could. We hesitated to use the generator, because gasoline either was not available or was rationed. Because the city was without electricity, we did not know all that was happening in New Orleans and the surrounding area. Our information came in bits and pieces and not continuously because it came from battery-operated devices, and we needed to reserve the batteries for the radio and the gasoline for the generator.

Unlike my colleagues, I was not surprised as to what unfolded in the aftermath of Katrina at the University. Having grown up (come of age) in Mississippi - a segregated Mississippi - having attended a segregated educational system from the first grade to undergraduate school, having worked in the Mississippi public welfare system, and having been the first Black faculty member at the University of Mississippi, I experienced the harshest of racial segregation. In an odd way, these harsh experiences prepared me to tolerate injustice, at times to expect it, and, more importantly, to advocate for the oppressed as others did for

me. Furthermore, the lived experiences of such injustice create a passionate voice for fairness and sensibility.

Empowered Collaboration and Social Justice

After we began meeting as a result of our common epiphanies of being devalued and invisible, we were invited to partner with Dr. Rhea Almeida, the founder and director of a community-based organization, the Institute for Family Service, out of Somerset, New Jersey. Dr. Almeida, also a member of the Porter-Cason Institute Board at the Tulane University School of Social Work, came to New Orleans in February with a team of researchers and videographers to interview families of color about their evacuation and return experience. A second member of the Porter-Cason Institute Board, Dr. Julius Harrington from Highlands University in New Mexico, joined Dr. Almeida's team as one of the researchers.

Dr. Almeida developed a social justice model of mental health practice fifteen years ago. This Cultural Context Model makes power and privilege central with an emphasis on race, gender, ethnicity, and class, and it has been used in New Jersey, New York, and California. Now, this social justice philosopher expanded her work to social justice research with and for us (Almeida, 1999). We were engaged as co-researchers who would now own data that would be collected by a well-organized group of community-based researchers. As a result of the collaboration with Dr. Almeida and her colleagues, we all became more aware of our own evacuation and return trauma. We were grateful for the wonderful opportunity to participate as principal researchers in the "natural laboratory" that was post-Katrina in New Orleans. We felt a renewed sense of value and had substantive data for our work. The biggest *lagniappe* was the caring, thoughtful and empowering collaboration of this generously talented group of individuals who helped us "reclaim our power" that had been dulled by the waters of the storm. The *Katrina Project* was born in New Orleans, nurtured and developed by community based researchers and videographers from New Jersey, New York, and California; by the Porter-Cason Institute; and by individuals from the African-American, Asian, Latino, and White Communities.

Our experiences with racism, sexism, discrimination, and invisibility prepared us in some bittersweet way for the painful responses and uniquely timed opportunities to forge a greater and more intimate bond with each other and with Rhea Almeida's group. We became a forceful collective. At the same time, the vulnerability, curiosity, and commitment to each other and the social justice agenda for African-Americans and other vulnerable populations made us more receptive to being part of a project in order to realize our own power. We no longer spoke as individual faculty members when we spoke about racialized poverty since we felt the power of the group. We made references to our group and to the Katrina Project to faculty and administration alike because we knew that we had been given something precious by social justice warriors who only wanted to see the project and our New Orleans team become visibly valued. Our outside supporters helped us move from feeling estranged to empowered. This transformation mirrors the Cultural Context Model, where culture circles respect local practices while challenging inequitable and self-serving behaviors that maintain the status quo. Furthermore, the intense electronic, on-site, and technology-driven dialogue that occurred during this disaster-response period, similar to the intense dialogue of the CCM, helped to transform us as more confident researchers and social justice advocates.

Our collective empowerment thus propelled us into our own space in the University community. We are forever changed by this experience of social–justice effort in practice, particularly in the research arena. We are now committed to this new model of social justice practice in action as a major approach for social work research, education, and advocacy.

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A message to search and recovery workers.