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Post-Katrina: Will New Orleans still be New Orleans?

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Darryl Durham walks children home in March from an after-school program he runs at St. Anna's Episcopal Church. It gives him an opportunity to talk with the kids and check in with parents, many of whom are struggling to make ends meet in the New New Orleans. (Photo by Edmund D. Fountain for Equal Voice News.)

NEW ORLEANS -- When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, it exposed to the world what locals already knew. This vibrant city -- the place where jazz was born, where the food is legendary, where culture runs deep -- had some big problems.

The poverty rate was about twice the national average. The crime rate was 25 percent higher, with five times as many people being incarcerated. Most of the public schools were failing.

With billions in federal, charity and insurance dollars flowing in after the storm, there were suddenly resources for change.

"The city essentially got the opportunity to do a do-over," said Carol Bebelle, a lifelong New Orleanian and executive director of Ashé Cultural Arts Center. "Most cities don't have that chance."

Indeed, the change has been enormous. It wasn't just a question of rebuilding -- or not -- what the floodwaters had washed away. After Katrina, authorities threw out the entire public education system. They knocked down public housing projects. They shuttered the longtime charity hospital.

In many ways, it was a top-to-bottom re-imagining of the cityscape.

So, is the city in a better place than it was nearly nine years ago? It depends on how closely you look. And who you ask. Talk to enough struggling New Orleanians and you'll soon begin to wonder whether the push forward is leaving the city's poor behind. And whether, when all this change has fully settled in, New Orleans will still be New Orleans.

Problems With Schools

There is perhaps no greater evidence of post-Katrina change than the New Orleans public school system.

Before Katrina, only 30 percent of New Orleans public school students attended a school that met state standards. Today, it's 63 percent. Hard to argue with that. But those numbers have come at a cost -- and may be misleading.

Hannah Sadtler saw it firsthand. Fresh out of Cornell University, she came to New Orleans in 2008 with Teach for America. The national nonprofit, conceived in 1989, recruits promising young leaders to teach in low-income districts like New Orleans.

The recruits don't have teaching credentials, but they go through a Teach for America training course. Five weeks later, Sadtler and her cohort were headed into the classroom. They soon found out just how ill prepared they were.

Sadtler felt worse when she learned how she and the others got their jobs in the first place. "They told me the reason they needed teachers in New Orleans was because there was a teacher shortage," she recalled. It turns out the school board had summarily (and, a court ruled, illegally) fired all of its teachers after Katrina.

These were middle-class jobs held by credentialed teachers, many of them African-American women who had just been through a disaster. And here was Sadtler, a 23-year-old from a privileged White background, brought in to take their place.

"There really was no need for me or the many thousands of others who have come into New Orleans to do those jobs," Sadtler said. She began spending time with some of the fired teachers to soak up their wisdom.

Second-line parades, though traditionally African-American, welcome anyone, including the Keep-N-It Real parade in March 2014. Photo by Edmund D. Fountain for Equal Voice News

The way the schools are run disturbed her as well. Essentially, the city's children are part of a vast educational experiment. Since Katrina, nearly all of New Orleans' public schools have become charters, run by more than 40 different governing boards.

Some parents like the new system. Others, like Ashana Bigard, a mother of three whose family goes back generations in this city, feel they have little say in their children's education. She wound up switching her daughter from school to school,

dissatisfied with her education.

She and others point to big problems. Kids with disabilities aren't being fully served. Some schools have waiting lists. Some have been shut down after failing to pass muster. Simply navigating the sprawl is a challenge. It takes a 180-page guide just to lay out basic facts about each school.

There has also been widespread concern about discipline and the tendency to suspend kids for even minor infractions. Parents say their children were being punished for wearing the wrong belt or socks with their unif0rms.

"They had a very militaristic style of discipline that wasn't empowering to students," Sadtler said of her school.

Some high schools suspended nearly half of their students at some point in the last school year.

Many New Orleanians have concluded that discipline numbers are high because schools are kicking out "problem" students to bump up their test scores. That raises questions about the statistics showing improvement.

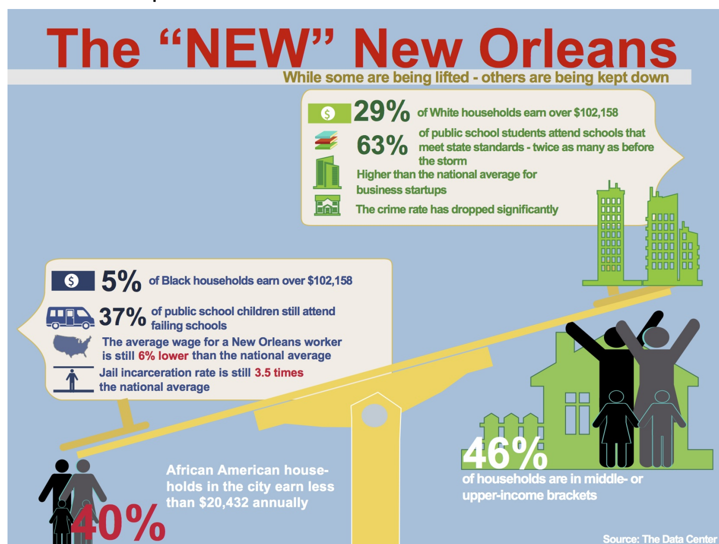
Last year, the district instituted a new centralized policy that may stabilize discipline rates. But, for now, there are a lot more questions than answers.

Housing Woes

Not far from New Orleans' downtown is a neighborhood called Central City. Since the early 19th century, it has gone from a residential enclave for European immigrants, to an African-American community hub. In the 1990s, blight set in, and even in the 2000s, it has been plagued by the dual depressants of poverty and violence.

But the neighborhood, like many in the Crescent City, is also a welcoming place. It's a focal point for the city's brass bands and home to Bebelle's organization, Ashé.

On a drizzly afternoon a week before Mardi Gras, Damia Khanboubi, who works at Ashé, shared a story that, in many ways, illustrates the post-Katrina conundrum.



(Click on image for a larger version.)

A couple years ago, the 25-year-old New Orleans native decided to move into Central City. She quickly settled into its unique rhythms, but about a year and a half later, she needed to find a new apartment.

"In that short amount of time," she recalled, "I watched my block completely change."

There were more artists, more nonprofits. Central City felt safer and was becoming more desirable. However, as Khanboubi soon realized, "as the neighborhood gets nicer, the prices go up and the people who used to live there can't afford it." It took her six months to find a place she could afford.

Call it revitalization; call it gentrification. Whatever you call it, it is in some ways a familiar story. New York's Greenwich Village went through it in the 1980s. San Francisco's Mission District did more recently. But in New Orleans, it's happening not just in one neighborhood but all over town.

For homeowners interested in selling, it can mean a windfall. For renters, not so much. Citywide, the median rent has risen 25 percent (inflation-adjusted dollars) since Katrina. In some neighborhoods, the increase has been even steeper.

Today, the median rent is about the same as the rest of the country, but median income is about one-third lower, according to The Data Center, a New Orleans organization that studies the region. As a result, more than half of New Orleans families don't earn enough to afford an average unit.

"Salaries have not gone up. Minimum wage has not gone up," Bigard, the mother of three, said. "Just the price of living has

gone up."

Some people have taken to calling the city the "Brooklyn of the South." It reflects the sense that the city has become the latest hipster haven.

You can see this Brooklynification in the booming restaurant scene -- with prices to match. You can see it in the gleaming new Whole Foods market across the street from the Dollar General store on Broad Street.

And you can see it in the faces of its residents. In 2000, the city was 67 percent African-American; in 2012, that figure had dropped to 59 percent.

Initially, Latinos were brought in as cheap labor for the rebuilding effort. There's been an influx of Whites, as well. Newcomers continue to arrive for the same reason Hannah Sadtler did: to help.

On the one hand, they're bringing their money and own unique experiences to a city. And, there has been economic improvement by several measures. But not necessarily for all.

Although the middle class has grown, the share of middle-income Black households has shrunk, according to The Data Center. There are a lot of new jobs, but Black men continue to be left out of the job market, with only 53 percent employed. It's not just Black men feeling the pinch either.

"You're now competing for jobs with people from Harvard and Cornell," Bigard said. Before Hurricane Katrina, she had a 12-year history of working in nonprofits. Since then, she's been stringing together temporary consulting jobs.

Public Housing Losses

Touring the city in 2014, you'll see construction cranes downtown. In other neighborhoods, like the Lower 9th Ward, you'll see vacant land where many houses for lower-income families once stood. And in several places, you'll see fenced-off old housing projects, looking as desolate as uninhabited islands.

Before Katrina, there were four major public housing projects in New Orleans, home to thousands of families. The old, worn-looking brick structures, in essence, segregated the poor.

Shortly after the hurricane, city and federal authorities decided to replace the public housing projects with new, mixed-income developments. The resulting developments look sunny and bright and, from the outside, appear to be an improvement.

But not all New Orleanians see it that way. Some staged protests over the planned demolitions, and, at one City Council meeting, police used pepper spray and Tasers on the protesters.

Part of the problem was sheer numbers. More public housing units were destroyed than were built, and many families lost their homes in the flooding.

A more recent planned demolition, approved last year, did not result in a big uproar. This time, residents sought assurance that locals would get jobs working on the redevelopment. The City Council said it couldn't mandate jobs as part of the contract because it would put financing at risk.

This brings us to a New Orleans Catch-22. The population is smaller because so many who fled after the storm did not return. There is more vacant housing in the city than there was before, so there are places former residents could come back to. But people can't afford them because of a lack of employment.

Changes in the Cultural Landscape

Music is central to New Orleans' identity, from its famous jazz clubs to its street-corner musicians to its parades. It isn't just about entertainment; it's about community, and it's deeply-rooted in the African American culture here.

Some worry that this singular culture is being muted. This year, the City Council tried to toughen the noise ordinance. Some bar owners said it would mean they'd have to close, and street-corner musicians worried that the culture that allowed them to hone their craft would be lost. The ordinance eventually was tabled.

Second-line parades, another New Orleans musical tradition, had a rough patch as well. The parades, featuring brass bands and dancers, march through neighborhoods, attracting crowds of spectators. Historically run and attended by African-Americans, the second-line parades are attracting more diversity of late, just like the city itself.

The first big second-line after Katrina was seen as a return to something that felt normal and uplifting, explained Tamara Jackson, president of the city's Social Aid and Pleasure Club Task Force. Unfortunately, there was a shooting on the sidelines. In response, authorities jacked up permit fees.

As Jackson explained, "there was a racial undertone." The Mardi Gras "krewes" -- which are mostly White -- kept their flat fee of $750 while the much smaller second-lines were paying many times that. About half of the parades were canceled because clubs couldn't afford the permit.

The ACLU sued, and the city agreed to reduce its fees. But now Jackson said they're battling other restrictions.

"You know," she said, raising an eyebrow, "we have a lot of problems here. We're always at war."

In Transition

Nearly nine years after the floodwaters receded, New Orleans is still in transition.

"We're moving from a time of ‘no more,'" said Bebelle of the city's flooded past, "to a time of ‘not yet.'"

Some of the changes have been positive: The violent crime rate has dropped significantly. The city is among the nation's leaders in the creation of new businesses. Minority-owned businesses are a growing part of that curve. Employment for women has increased. A vast new medical complex could bring jobs.

Yet the city's schools are still far from optimal. Poverty is high.

Other cities, of course, are struggling with some of these issues. In the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, the rising cost of living, fueled in part by technology companies, has pushed out lower-income folks. There, residents have staged street protests, targeting the private buses that Google uses to shuttle its well-paid employees to work.

In New Orleans, there is no Google. So whom do you blame? Some point to the newcomers: If it weren't for them, they say, the rents wouldn't be going up. There would be more jobs for locals.

Bebelle believes that's not quite fair.

"People saw us on our knees and packed their bags to come live here," she said of the aftermath of Katrina. "It does not serve us well to feel invaded."

She thinks about the cultural center she founded, about the racial, economic and social diversity in her neighborhood. And she thinks about the real heart of Crescent City: its culture and its people, who wave to friends and strangers alike and think it's rude not to stop by and chat.

"People didn't come here for a social experiment," she said. "They came here because it was a nice neighborhood."

It is that unmistakable charm that will continue to draw them in -- for better, or for worse.