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TIM COATES

*The Boston Globe***Katrina's heroes**

By Tim Coates | August 20, 2006

IN LESS THAN two weeks, the first year of reconstruction in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina will pass into history. So far, much of that history is being written as a litany of failure and tragedy.

The list of problems is long. The Louisiana National Guard has been called in to help fight a surge in violent crime. The citywide planning process is disjointed and contentious. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has mismanaged billions of dollars of relief funds. Hundreds of thousands remain displaced. The city government is bankrupt.

But despite the stultifying summer humidity, New Orleanians are not sitting idly by on their stoops. Whatever the city's larger woes, neighborhoods are planning their futures, and inspiring stories abound of community leadership in the face of tremendous adversity.

As a member of a group of John F. Kennedy School of Government students and researchers, I spent a week in March in New Orleans doing strategic planning for a community association in the Broadmoor neighborhood. I arrived thinking -- wrongly -- that there might still be water in the streets, but instead saw grass-roots efforts to bring communities back better than they were. By the time I returned to New Orleans in May for the summer to continue with our team's work, it was clear that those grass-roots efforts were occurring throughout the city.

For months, neighborhoods have been forming sophisticated community organizations that empower residents and build social capital. They are creating initiatives to repopulate their neighborhoods, renovate or demolish blighted properties, construct affordable housing, support local business and plan for possible future evacuations.

This has all been accomplished by ordinary Americans rising up to fill the leadership void. Residents have joined with neighbors to revive their communities, even as they worked full time, raised families, dealt with contractors and sub-contractors on a daily basis, and lived out of hotel rooms, rental apartments, or with friends. Broadmoor is a perfect example. Before Katrina, the 7,000 inhabitants of the sleepy residential neighborhood mirrored the city's ethnic makeup, with a 70 percent black population. When the levees broke, flood waters inundated Broadmoor with 8 feet of fetid water, threatening the viability of one of New Orleans' most diverse neighborhoods.

In January, galvanized by a map indicating that some neighborhoods

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-- including Broadmoor -- might become drainage parks, the community started organizing to prove its viability. Neighborhood leaders worked out of a small office in a church trailer, the only available meeting space in the neighborhood.

Today Broadmoor is among the city's most active communities. Membership in the Broadmoor Improvement Association has increased fourfold since Katrina. Hundreds of residents took part in committees to discuss, argue, and document their vision for their neighborhood. When the group met to announce the release of its 327-page neighborhood improvement plan, 400 residents attended, along with Mayor Ray Nagin and other city leaders.

The plan is a pragmatic road map to reviving the area. Broadmoor has established a community development corporation to receive and distribute funds. Residents have instituted a block captain system, in which residents who have returned to the neighborhood help neighbors who are just coming back to their ruined homes. Over the past seven months, Broadmoor has also cultivated partnerships with the Kennedy School, Shell Oil and other companies, a local architectural firm, and, most importantly, faith-based communities.

Located in Broadmoor, the Episcopal Free Church of the Annunciation exemplifies what faith-based initiatives can achieve. Members are transforming their sanctuary and fellowship hall into a dormitory and dining room to house and feed volunteer work crews. The church has purchased two historic houses adjacent to its campus to convert into a community center and shared office space. Through the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, members have acquired a triple-wide trailer to substitute as their church for the next decade. The burst of activity in Broadmoor is hardly unique. Residents of other devastated areas -- in the Ninth Ward, Mid-City, New Orleans East and Gentilly, among others -- have assumed an attitude of self-sufficiency as they work to overcome desperate challenges.

When the first anniversary of Katrina arrives Aug. 29, an honest accounting will report the slow pace of recovery and the difficulty of the rebuilding process. But the world should also hear the extraordinary stories of Americans making history by building hope out of ruins.

*Tim Coates is a Masters in Public Policy candidate at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.* ■

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