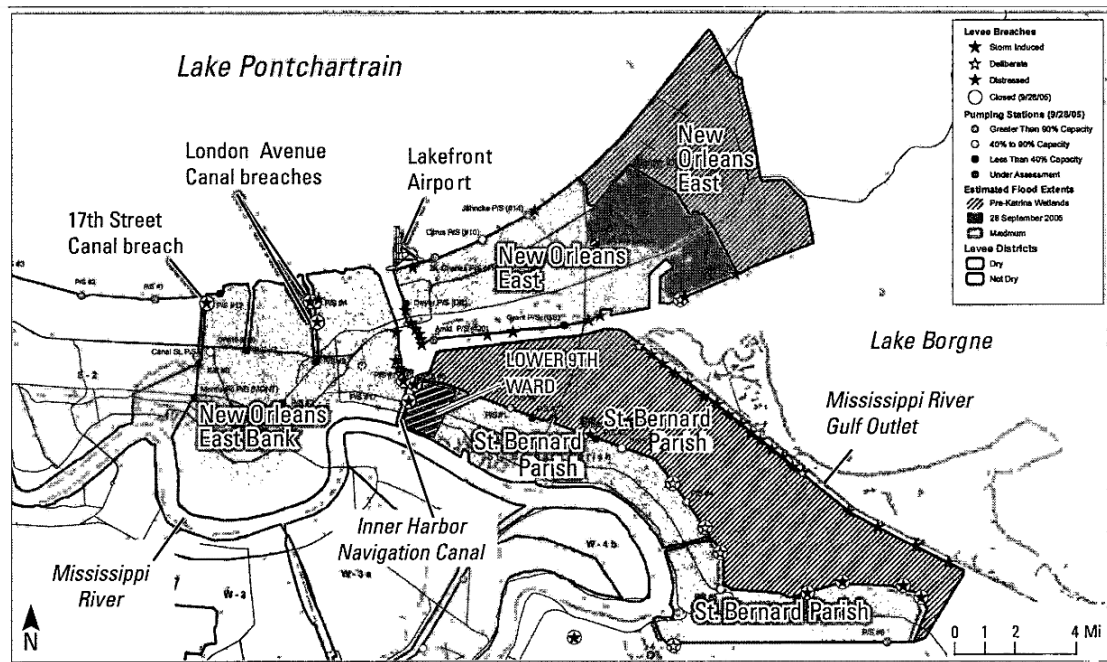


“Mean Ol’ Levee”: Unpacking Civilian Katrina Narratives



Map via the U.S. Geological Survey

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HST 592

3/14/24

5476 words

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina, one of the most devastating natural disasters in United States history, made landfall in Louisiana. The hurricane unleashed unprecedented destruction on the Gulf Coast, forever altering the lives of countless individuals and communities. The impact of Hurricane Katrina has been extensively discussed and chronicled by scholars who have sought to understand the multifaceted consequences of the disaster, and recent scholarship has primarily focused on the social and environmental factors that contributed to the disaster's magnitude, such as the city's segregation and the role of environmental racism in the rebuilding process. This research highlights the systemic issues that exacerbated the effects of the hurricane and the challenges faced by marginalized communities during the recovery phase. Additionally, scholars have examined the official responses to the disaster, assessing the effectiveness of the deployment of various agencies such as the Red Cross, the Coast Guard, the National Guard, and the Disaster Medical Assistance Teams (DMATs).¹

However, also among those who endured the storm's fury were intrepid civilians who assumed the mantle of first responders, providing indispensable support and care to their communities in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. What this paper aims to do is to illustrate the under-told stories of those civilian responders, as told in their own words. Through the Historic New Orleans Collection's "Through Hell and High Water: Katrina's First Responders Oral History Project" and "Vieux Carré Memoir Oral History Project," we gain a unique glimpse into the experiences of everyday people, who, despite facing their own personal struggles of varying complexity, still worked to help others in need during this existentially threatening event.

¹Steinberg, Theodore. *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.; Kelman, Ari. *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006.; Levitt, Jeremy I., and Matthew C. Whitaker. *Hurricane Katrina: America's Unnatural Disaster*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.; Horowitz, Andy. *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022.

The timeline of Hurricane Katrina is as follows: Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco declared a statewide state of emergency on Friday, August 27th. On Saturday, the 28th, official orders were given to evacuate the city, and President George W. Bush declared a federal state of emergency. By Sunday, the 29th, Katrina was officially a Category 5 hurricane, and evacuation orders were made mandatory. Katrina officially made landfall in Louisiana at around 6 AM on Monday, August 29th, and much of New Orleans lost power shortly after. At around 8 AM, the storm struck the city proper, and at 8:14, the National Weather Service reported the first levee breach.² As many of these sources will describe, many residents of Southern Louisiana initially thought that they had weathered the storm relatively unscathed, as the storm was officially reported to have weakened late Sunday night and changed direction significantly. The eye of the storm missed New Orleans proper by approximately twenty miles: the initial storms that occurred as the hurricane approached the city were thought to have been the worst of the winds and the flooding.³

National media reported on the failure of the government to adequately proactively protect its citizens, a sentiment that repeatedly echoes throughout these interviews, but it also espoused a narrative of an overall “collapse of the social order,” a sentiment that, largely, was not shared by many people with boots on the ground.⁴ This sentiment was also largely racialized. When the media reported on scavenging, the verbiage used depended on the race of the scavenger: Black people ‘looted’ while white people ‘found’ things.⁵ Federal agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), had official presences in New Orleans,

² Erich, J. (n.d.). "Chronology of a Catastrophe: Hurricane Katrina Timeline." HMP Global Learning Network. Accessed March 14, 2024.

[<https://www.hmpgloballearningnetwork.com/site/emsworld/article/10323581/chronology-of-a-catastrophe-hurricane-katrina-timeline>.] ; Horowitz, “Katrina”116-117

³ Horowitz 18

⁴ Horowitz 121

⁵ Horowitz 122

but despite releasing press reports touting “millions of gallons of water, tons of food, and piles of electrical generators,” many of the people who would be the intended recipients of this federal aid never saw any of it due to mismanagement.⁶ For example: when asked by a federal representative if he had formally requested a solution to his community’s food shortages, Walter Maestri, Jefferson Parish’s director of homeland security, said, “We requested it, have requested it, been requesting it, and nothing’s coming.”⁷

The stories represented here are intended to be diverse, but by no means representative of all of those affected. They are presented in roughly alphabetical order, with common threads connecting each presenter. Beginning with Health and Human Services volunteer Ronnie Barrilleaux, independent responder Ashley Boudreaux, and logistics manager Lily Duke, with an interlude by Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes, it becomes evident that the societal breakdown reported by the media was largely exaggerated. Continuing with the accounts of boat-based rescuer Stacy Kidder and Disaster Medical Assistance nurse Ron Lopez, the failure of the federal emergency response is fully illuminated. The accounts conclude with shorter stories from Mark Morice, an attorney who provided an account of staying in town during the storm, and from Tommy Tusa, a small business owner whose business continues to be greatly impacted by hurricane-related flooding to this day.

Ronnie Barrilleaux

“The first thing we saw was a body floating in the water.”⁸

⁶Levitt, Jeremy I., and Matthew C. Whitaker. Hurricane Katrina: America’s Unnatural Disaster. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009, 247.

⁷ Levitt and Whitaker, 248.

⁸ Ronnie Barrilleaux for the “Through Hell and High Water: Katrina’s First Responders Oral History Project,” November 6, 2008, MSS 571, transcript, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA, 6.

Ronnie Barrilleaux, a home inspector and native of Baton Rouge, got involved in the Katrina rescue efforts after following the storm's aftermath on television. Upon receiving a call from his close friend Jason Morris on the Sunday morning following the storm, Barrilleaux and Morris proceeded to meet with the Department of Health and Human Services in the parking lot of the Jimmy Swaggart campus, where they received immunizations, signed paperwork, and obtained identification.⁹ Barrilleaux recalls one official briefing given by Department officials where they were cautioned about contaminated water, advised not to force anyone to evacuate, and told that weapons (if they were licensed to carry them) were their own responsibility. Pairing up with another volunteer group and a group of Texas firefighters who, between them, had two boats, Barrilleaux and his compatriots quickly began to encounter bodies floating in the water, which they were told not to touch and instead to mark the location for the authorities. Among the bodies, further into the neighborhoods, they found many people who were receptive to donations of potable water but who were reluctant to evacuate, hopeful that the water would recede soon. Those who were rescuable were brought to a location across from the city, near railroad tracks “built up like a levee” where helicopters were landing.¹⁰ Trying to move east toward harder-hit areas like New Orleans East and Chalmette, Barrilleaux and his crew eventually had to drag their boats over railroad tracks, the only real pieces of infrastructure that were not meaningfully impacted by the flood. Entire cemeteries were underwater,¹¹ and Barrilleaux recalls areas where the water was clear enough for him to look down and see that the group was “three or four feet over the top of just roads and vehicles.”¹²

⁹ Jimmy Swaggart Campus: formally the Family Worship Center, a megachurch run by televangelist Jimmy Swaggart. Located at 8919 World Ministry Ave, Baton Rouge, LA

¹⁰ Barrilleaux, 7.

¹¹ Because the city is at sea level, New Orleans cemeteries are largely above ground and made up of mausoleums instead of underground graves. For more, see: Koppel, Lily. 2005. Coffins and buried remains set adrift by hurricanes create a grisly puzzle. October 25, 2005. New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/25/us/nationalspecial/coffins-and-buried-remains-set-adrift-by-hurricanes.html>

¹² Barrilleaux, 12.

In contrast to the apocalyptic narratives of bands of raving looters, the only overtly suspicious person Barrilleaux remembers encountering was a man with an assault rifle driving a truck on said railroad tracks. He extended an ambiguous offer of help to them, but they were uncertain of his true intentions, and later in the day, they would see the same man shooting out the window of a van and hot-wiring it. The man in question was, again in contrast to the purported Black gangs, described as “quite a character,” a white man in his late twenties with tattoos and a buzz cut.¹³

Other than that man, there was a notable lack of people outside, though helicopters were very common, with both military and coast guard choppers present: “Helicopters nonstop. At any moment in the day, you’d look up and see three, four, five helicopters.”¹⁴ Despite these official-looking vehicles, Barrilleaux reports that he did not have any official interactions with first-responding agencies. Most of the people he encountered were civilian volunteers and firefighters from other states, like Texas and Oklahoma. The operation seemed largely organized on a volunteer basis, with individuals going out on their own to assist in rescue efforts and returning home at the end of the day.

Overall, Ronnie Barrilleaux is critical of the dominant portrayal of the disaster response, believes that the media exhibited bias in its coverage of Katrina and the response efforts, and feels that the media made a bigger deal out of the situation in New Orleans compared to other disasters in the country. He also believes that some people affected by the disaster could have done more to help themselves, as he perceived the main reason for people not evacuating as being their underestimation of the extent of the disaster and a desire to remain in familiar

¹³ Barrilleaux, 9.

¹⁴ Barrilleaux, 13.

surroundings. Ultimately, Barrilleaux's experience did not significantly change his worldview, as he previously expressed a personal philosophy of individual responsibility and mistrust of the government.

Ashley Boudreaux

“There was trash and there was clothing everywhere, and trees down everywhere, and the water stank. You know, it was warm like warm tea.”¹⁵

Ashley Boudreaux, a former freelance journalist and bar manager of the French Quarter's Rio Bar and Grill, married her husband shortly before the storm hit, under the condition that if a hurricane hit, she would evacuate if he insisted. They spent their honeymoon in Miami in between Hurricanes Dennis in July and Katrina in late August, racing back home to pack what they could and grab Boudreaux's nine-year-old son, Cody. From a family member's house in Lafayette, Boudreaux obsessively watched news coverage of the disaster, forgetting her own birthday, which occurred that Sunday.¹⁶ By Monday morning, there was no ability to make phone calls into the city. Despite reassurances from other civilians and official sources, Boudreaux's dread began to mount: “Something's really seriously wrong. They've been showing the same footage for an hour and a half. Why don't they have any footage if we dodged the bullet?”¹⁷

After finally witnessing devastating helicopter footage of the flooded city, Boudreaux and her husband, D.J., were deeply moved, and the gravity of the situation prompted them to take action. The family's route from Baton Rouge involved taking Highway 12 to Interstate 10,

¹⁵ Ashley Boudreaux for the Through Hell and High Water: Katrina's First Responders Oral History Project, August 20, 2008, MSS 571, transcript, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA., 38.

¹⁶ A city about two hours east of New Orleans that became host to a massive number of refugees in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita

¹⁷ Boudreaux, 10.

passing through Kenner. As they approached their destination, the unsettling smell of decomposing bodies became increasingly apparent: “You could smell dead bodies all the way at La Place.¹⁸ ... And it got stronger, the closer you got.”¹⁹ Initially entering New Orleans on Wednesday to organize aid, Bordeaux and her family were forced to withdraw on Thursday due to purported violence against rescue workers and FEMA's order to halt operations amid civil unrest (described by Boudreaux as “the shootings that never happened”).²⁰ They later returned to New Orleans on Friday, alternating their presence in Baton Rouge and staying at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Boudreaux detailed the challenges and improvisations involved in their post-Hurricane Katrina rescue efforts. She spoke about acquiring fuel for the boaters from the Department of Agriculture, creating official-looking placards at Kinko's, and managing informal debriefings with the rescue team. Boudreaux expressed frustration with the perceived spin around rescuers being shot at, suspecting it as an attempt to obfuscate reality: “I was already struggling, suspecting that it was spin, and it was pissing me off. I thought it was the stories of rescuers getting shot at was spin that was coming from the federal administration to deflect their responsibility.”²¹

During Hurricane Katrina rescue operations, Ashley Boudreaux experienced a poignant moment in the Treme area. While winching a boat, she noticed an official-looking black SUV pass by an unconscious woman, whom she managed to revive, and who, in her delirium, mistook Ashley for an angel. When seeking help from FEMA personnel in the SUV who had passed by initially, Ashley and her team were met with indifference. Despite this, the volunteers managed to get an ambulance to the scene, saving the woman's life. This incident left a lasting impact on

¹⁸ A Western suburban area of New Orleans.

¹⁹ Boudreaux, 14.

²⁰ Boudreaux, 44.

²¹ Boudreaux, 28.

Boudreaux, highlighting FEMA's lack of concern for individual lives. According to Boudreaux, FEMA's overall presence was limited, and any control they might have assumed was not evident at the EOC, where she mentioned encountering only one FEMA representative who faced a significant amount of criticism from volunteers. Boudreaux's experiences with FEMA (or a lack thereof) contribute to a broader narrative of their uselessness and callousness in the face of human suffering, while her experiences with fellow volunteers and the people she aided helped reinforce her positive view of the people in her community. Despite the purported lack of social order and the largely inflated reports of violence against rescue workers, Boudreaux largely had a productive stint as a relief worker, and ultimately condemns federal agencies and media outlets for allowing them to deflect responsibility.

Lily Duke

*"They just didn't know how to deal with it. [...] Even though you don't know how to deal with it, you learn, but you don't turn your back."*²²

Born and raised in the Philippines, independent film producer Lily Duke had previous experiences with typhoons, floods, volcanoes, and earthquakes, but never hurricanes. Living in New Orleans on a temporary basis to start pre-production on a film, Duke's career was interrupted by the storm. Duke, her friends (including a man named Hudson Wolfe), and their dogs (including Lily's chihuahua, Chico) had all planned to weather the storm out at Lily's apartment, which was high above the ground. It was not until Saturday evening that Wolfe warned everyone that the storm was a Category 5, and their best option was to evacuate. Duke and Wolfe evacuated to Mobile, Alabama, but only stayed out of town until Monday morning,

²² Lily Duke for the Through Hell and High Water: Katrina's First Responders Oral History Project, June 19, 2006, MSS 571, transcript, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA., 18.

when they decided to return to the city. The two were stopped by the Louisiana State Patrol, who would not let them in without disaster relief credentials. Back in Baton Rouge, Duke reached out to her “military brat” colleagues, who managed to help her find equipment and get her sponsored by the Church of Christ Disaster Relief Organization.

As officially sanctioned disaster relief volunteers, Duke and her friends set up a camp at Mardi Gras World, where they began to work with the military on supply logistics.²³ Unfortunately, the Church of Christ quickly pulled out, leaving Duke to rely on her connections to continue bringing in more supplies. Additionally, on a personal level, Duke experienced many complications from the storm. Her apartment suffered extensive damage, including the creation of two large holes in the roof that exposed the interior during rainstorms, the stripping of all protective shingles from the kitchen, and persistent dampness that permeated the entire space. Because of this, Duke fell ill and was forced by the military personnel she interacted with on a daily basis to seek medical attention. A military doctor determined that she had bronchitis, likely exacerbated by the mold in her apartment. She also faced homelessness due to a legal dispute with her landlord and was provided with temporary housing in a tent city by the waterfront.

A major criticism Duke had of the national media was their focus on the rebuilding of tourist areas like Bourbon Street and whether annual events like Mardi Gras and the Jazz Festival were going to be able to take place the following year.²⁴ She was interviewed by news outlets and implored them to tell the “real story” of areas “just past Bourbon Street” that still lacked power after a great deal of time had passed.²⁵ Because the downtown areas began to have some of their

²³ Mardi Gras World: a large warehouse near the Convention Center where Mardi Gras floats are constructed and stored during the off-season, 1380 Port of New Orleans Pl, New Orleans, LA.

²⁴ Mardi Gras is celebrated the day before Ash Wednesday, commonly in mid-February or early March. The New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival commonly takes place during the last weekend in April and the first weekend in May.

²⁵ Duke, 18.

businesses up and running, Duke began to focus her attention eastward on the more rural Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes as her supply lines dwindled. Her volunteer operation quickly grew from a small effort to a large-scale operation, with volunteer firefighters and EMTs showing up to help without Duke even knowing how they arrived. One particular instance involved the Red Cross showing up unannounced and causing logistical issues because they did not follow Duke's well-established order.

Her experiences running this large-scale volunteer organization led Duke to formally create Duke Independent Disaster Relief (DIDR), a grassroots organization focused on efficient disaster response. The organization's structure was designed to leverage the expertise of individuals who have previously worked together in disaster relief efforts, including but not limited to Firefighters, EMTs, and military veterans. Each member had a specific role based on their expertise, from logistics and supply management to food service and camp operations, and Duke's own role within DIDR was focused on securing donations, negotiating partnerships, and ensuring the smooth flow of supplies to affected areas. Because of her both personal and professional negative experiences with disorganized responses, Duke aimed to use DIDR to create a more resilient and effective disaster response system.²⁶

Despite their different backgrounds, common themes emerge in the stories of Ronnie Barrilleaux, Ashley Boudreaux, and Lily Duke. Firstly, all three individuals highlight the significant role of civilian volunteers in the aftermath of the disaster. Secondly, their accounts reveal the challenges and limitations of official disaster response agencies. Barrilleaux and Boudreaux both express frustration with the lack of interaction and support from official

²⁶ At the time of her interview, DIDR was still awaiting its 501(c)(3) status. According to Ms. Duke's LinkedIn page, it appears that DIDR has been defunct since 2011. (Lily Duke, Experience [LinkedIn page]. LinkedIn. Retrieved March 14, 2024, from <https://www.linkedin.com/in/lilyduke/details/experience/>)

agencies, and Duke's specific experiences with the Church of Christ and the Red Cross underscore the logistical challenges and bureaucratic hurdles that can impede effective disaster relief. Lastly, the narratives of Barrilleaux, Boudreaux, and Duke illustrate the personal impact of the disaster. From Barrilleaux's reaffirmation of his philosophy to Boudreaux's heightened sense of community and Duke's transition from a temporary resident to an officially sanctioned disaster relief volunteer, each story reflects the profound ways in which Hurricane Katrina shaped their lives and worldviews.

Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes

*"Simple human kindness performed by strangers and to strangers forged a wonderful human community, and we must not lose that lesson."*²⁷

Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes' account of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina highlights the crucial role of faith communities in providing not only material support but also spiritual solace in times of crisis. Arriving at an abbey in St. Tammany Parish before the storm hit, Hughes witnessed firsthand the wind damage that contrasted with the flooding in New Orleans.²⁸ After the storm, monks cleared a path by sawing through fallen trees, enabling access to a clear St. Gertrude subdivision and to Highway 25 by Tuesday afternoon. The monks' efforts to clear a path through fallen trees by Tuesday afternoon exemplify the immediate response of the religious community to restore access and aid.

²⁷ Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes for the Through Hell and High Water: Katrina's First Responders Oral History Project, September 25, 2007, MSS 571, transcript, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA., 10.

²⁸ Specifically Saint Joseph Abbey, located at 75376 River Rd., Saint Benedict, LA. Located directly across Lake Pontchartrain from Orleans Parish.

The Archbishop's relocation to Our Lady of Mercy rectory in Baton Rouge further illustrates the solidarity and support within the religious community.²⁹ The rectory, transformed into a hub of assistance, collected significant funds from parishioners and expanded its school to accommodate additional students, reflecting the widespread commitment to aiding those displaced by the storm. The repurposing of the parish center for Red Cross workers underscores the collaborative efforts between religious organizations and relief agencies. Priests and clergy were assigned to various roles, from serving at the Superdome and airport to providing pastoral care in shelters across different cities and states. Their presence in these critical areas highlights the importance of spiritual care in times of disaster, addressing the needs of the sick, dying, and destitute. Archbishop Hughes' observation that the primary desire of his constituents was to “know that God cared,” emphasizes the profound need for spiritual reassurance amidst the chaos and uncertainty.³⁰

The testimony of Archbishop Hughes sheds light on the remarkable response of churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, which demonstrated competence, commitment, and concern for the common good. This response transcended racial and religious lines, forging a sense of human community through simple acts of kindness. The Archbishop's reflections serve as a reminder of the enduring power of faith and compassion in the face of adversity, and the vital role of religious communities in fostering hope and resilience during and after disasters.

²⁹ 445 Marquette Ave, Baton Rouge, LA.

³⁰ Huges, 10.

Stacy Kidder

“I mean, that guy was shooting ducks and it got turned into a mob of looters.”³¹

At the time of his interview, Stacy Kidder was the president of Kidder, Inc., a company that services the Louisiana oil industry with metal fabrication. At the time of the disaster, Kidder was living in St. Mary Parish, which was largely untouched by the storm (Kidder specifically recalls several downed trees in his area) and initially volunteered simply because he owned his own boat.³² He did not initially get involved with search and rescue operations because, from where he lived, it appeared that the storm had largely missed New Orleans, and the “real tragedy” did not seem to start until the next morning. After receiving word of how bad the “real tragedy” was, Kidder and his crew organized a rescue effort, dropping off supplies and rescuing a group of people who had walked from downtown through chest-high water to escape. Reports of shootings in the Kenner area, the same shootings that Ashley Boudreaux does not believe factually occurred, cut short this trip to New Orleans. Kidder then volunteered for a second rescue mission, assisted by Dr. Trey Morice, who arranged permission for them to enter the city and provided passes to get through roadblocks. During this second mission, Kidder recalled launching his boat “somewhere near the 610” and bringing any rescued individuals back to the same overpass where they launched the boats, where each team of boats was assigned a medical person to check on rescued individuals and maintain radio contact.³³

³¹ Stacy Kidder for the Through Hell and High Water: Katrina's First Responders Oral History Project, September 23, 2008, MSS 571, transcript, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA., 12

³² St. Mary Parish is southeast of Lafayette, south of Baton Rouge.

³³ Possibly off of a “Canal Street” or “Canal Boulevard.” He recalls someone remarking: “Ha, ha, ha, now it is a canal.” (Kidder, 6).

During the day, they encountered challenges navigating through debris-filled waters, including floating propane tanks and submerged fences. They only rescued two individuals that day, rescue operations were called off about two hours before dark due to nebulous ‘safety concerns’ regarding reports of looters shooting. Kidder recalled a specific incident where a state official instructed his team to avoid a specific area due to the threat of violence, an instruction which they ignored, finding out that the shooting and calamity came from a hunter who was using a boat trailer to navigate over a levee and shooting ducks for food.

Kidder describes the organization of this second trip as being “not quite all there,” with “one wrangler calling the shots” based on “bad intelligence” that led the team to an area that was largely already abandoned.³⁴ Kidder notes that the disorganization of the people in charge of this rescue operation reflected very poorly on the government agencies, but he then goes on to praise the bravery and readiness of volunteer firefighters from Oklahoma that he encountered during his excursions. While he now has a lower opinion of FEMA and other federal responders, he does reflect on the fact that there were some locations civilian teams could not reach and required helicopter or military rescues.

Ron Lopez

*“The worst part was that the head of FEMA had a background in horse racing. Ok, so the next time you go to a neurosurgeon, make sure that the guy wasn’t a hot dog salesman before the surgery.”*³⁵

³⁴ Kidder, 32.

³⁵ Ron Lopez for the Through Hell and High Water: Katrina's First Responders Oral History Project, January 20, 2007, MSS 571, transcript, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA., 20.

Ron Lopez, a visiting supervisory nurse with California 6 Disaster Medical Assistance Team, was previously deployed to various other disaster responses, including the 1994 Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and post-9/11 disaster planning in San Francisco. His professional experience with disaster relief lends his opinions on the response to Hurricane Katrina an air of expertise, and he notably critiques the poor planning, intelligence, and communication of both civilian, federal, and military agencies: a “lack of local planning” on the part of the locals, a “lack of planning at the state level” regarding the ability to support communications, and a “failure at the federal level” to consistently mobilize units and logistically supply them.³⁶

Lopez vividly describes the scene upon entering the Superdome after Hurricane Katrina, painting a picture of surreal darkness, exacerbated by the stench of human waste due to the receded stormwater. Thousands of people, representing all strata of society, were present both inside the Superdome and in the surrounding area.³⁷ The chaotic atmosphere was compounded by blaring sirens, alarm noises, and flashing strobe lights in complete darkness. Despite the challenging conditions, Lopez and his team quickly got to work, tasked with identifying and treating around three thousand medical patients. With only thirty-five responders, including himself, the ratio was one responder to every hundred patients. They worked at a rapid pace, seeing an estimated six patients per minute.

³⁶ Lopez, 3.

³⁷ Lopez and Cave talk about the “Superdome” throughout their interview, and only once does Lopez clarify that they were specifically working out of the “Hornets basketball stadium.” It can be assumed that Mr. Lopez meant the Smoothie King Center, a smaller stadium next door to the Superdome, home of the New Orleans Pelicans, who were, at the time of the interview, named the New Orleans Hornets. The name “Superdome” will be used for consistency. The Superdome is located at 1500 Sugar Bowl Dr, New Orleans, LA. The Smoothie King Center is located at 1501 Dave Dixon Dr, New Orleans, LA.

With regards to the perceived breakdown of civility in disaster, Lopez did not blame the victims but instead blamed the environment, describing the Superdome complex as a “perfect storm of variables to produce the extremes of human behavior” with conditions designed to strip away hope and exacerbate tensions.³⁸ Lopez mentions that he never personally witnessed instances of rape or victims of gun violence, but he acknowledges treating assault victims and recalls one National Guardsman being shot while Lopez himself was taking a nap. He compares the decision-making in the Superdome to the hectic environment of an inner-city emergency department on a busy night, the core of ethical decision-making being similar, although the magnitude of the situation was much greater in the Superdome. Lopez believes that the entire rescue situation could have been improved with additional National Guardsmen on the ground and a fully committed federal protective police unit. He mentions a recent (at the time) policy change that requires deployment teams to be attached to a federal police unit from start to finish, which he views as a positive change.

When asked about how he would change things, Lopez emphasizes the importance of public education and safety planning, particularly for disadvantaged populations, in the context of natural disasters like hurricanes. He also criticizes the lack of proactive planning and support for the entire population, citing the ineffectiveness of evacuation warnings for those who could not afford to evacuate. He points out the failure of officials to provide adequate resources and support for vulnerable communities before disasters hit and specifically criticizes the mayor for urging people to seek medical help at the Superdome without having proper logistics, communications, and supplies in place beforehand. Finally, Lopez also criticizes the lack of

³⁸ Lopez 10.

professional disaster planning staff at the mayoral and gubernatorial levels, highlighting the inadequacy of FEMA's leadership in handling the crisis.

Stacy Kidder and Ron Lopez's stories provide contrasting perspectives on the challenges and complexities of the rescue and relief efforts during Hurricane Katrina: Kidder's experience underscores the importance of local volunteers in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, but it also points to the disorganization and lack of effective coordination among government agencies, whereas Lopez's experience as a nurse provides a more professional critical perspective on the response to Katrina. Both narratives touch on the theme of misinformation and the impact it has on rescue efforts. Kidder mentions the exaggerated reports of looters shooting at rescuers, which led to the premature cessation of rescue operations, while Lopez critiques the lack of accurate information and planning that contributed to the dire conditions in the Superdome.

Mark Morice & Salvatore "Tommy" Tusa

With his friends Walker Lassiter and Beau Whalen, Mark Morice, an attorney and brother of aforementioned Dr. Trey Morice, rode out the catastrophic storm in his home in the uptown district of Broadmoor, sandwiched between larger houses, snug but vulnerable amid the impending chaos.³⁹ The three men and Whalen's dog, Peyo, sat huddled in the only room in the house devoid of windows, feeling the whole place tremble "like a giant had grabbed the house and just started shaking it." After the storm passed, with water rising gradually, they paddled around the neighborhood in a makeshift flatboat and surveyed the damage. The flooding, initially manageable, took a turn for the worse, catching them off guard. Lassiter swiftly exited the area, leaving Morice, Whalen, and others bewildered by the swiftly rising water.

³⁹ 3312 Napoleon Ave, New Orleans, LA.

Ultimately, seeking refuge in a neighboring house on higher ground, they observed the surreal sight of water pouring in from different directions. The night brought eerie moments: car alarms in drowned vehicles, cries for help from trapped neighbors, and swirling rumors, including sensational tales of escaped prisoners. Morice's story is emblematic of many of the people who refused to evacuate, many of whom either passed away due to the nature of the storm or had to be rescued by the Coast Guard or other civilians like those who shared their stories in these collections.

Tommy Tusa owned the French Quarter deli Central Grocery in August 2005 and continues to operate it to this day. Opened by his grandfather in 1919, Central Grocery is famous for being the very first business to sell the legendary muffuletta sandwich and is located less than 2 blocks from major tourist centers Jackson Square and Cafe Du Monde.⁴⁰ During his evacuation with his entire extended family to Birmingham, Alabama, Tusa had a conversation with a neighbor about potential losses: "He asked me, 'What are you going to do [...] if you lost everything?' And my answer to him was, 'I didn't lose anything. [...] I hope I didn't lose the business, but my family's here. I haven't lost a thing.'"

Three and a half weeks after Hurricane Katrina, Tusa returned to the store, using a special pass to get into the city through the barricade of military police. The store had been looted, like most surrounding businesses, but not flooded. The insurance company urged Central Grocery to reopen, but finding a restoration company willing to help was difficult, as all contractors were preoccupied with larger jobs until Tusa called Northwest Restoration. Initially facing a wait as long as four weeks, as soon as Tusa shared the name of his business, a beloved institution, the

⁴⁰ Central Grocery and Deli, 923 Decatur St, New Orleans, LA.

contractor “came the next day with a twelve-man crew and cleaned us up in three days.”⁴¹

Despite this, they did not reopen for three months, finally doing so on December 1st with a skeleton crew due to the slow return of people to the city.

Mark Morice is still an attorney and resides in the Gretna suburb, protected by the same levee system as New Orleans proper, and Tommy Tusa remains the owner of Central Grocery, operating it with his family. The shop is set to reopen in the Spring of 2024, after a lengthy remodeling period due to devastation caused by Hurricane Ida, which hit Southern Louisiana in late August 2021. These men are just two of countless New Orleans residents who endured traumatic experiences with Katrina and yet have continued to stay in flood-prone southern Louisiana for nearly 20 years, demonstrating a continued trust in the protective measures of the region despite the trauma of Hurricane Katrina. Their decisions to stay showcase a deep love for their city, a refusal to be defined by the disasters that have struck, and a fundamental commitment to continually rebuilding and moving forward.

In conclusion, the stories of individuals such as Ronnie Barrilleaux, Ashley Boudreaux, Lily Duke, Stacy Kidder, Ron Lopez, Mark Morice, and Tommy Tusa serve as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant media portrayal of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which often focused on chaos, looting, and governmental failures. These personal accounts highlight the factual realities of those who lived through the disaster and their efforts to aid in the recovery, challenging the oversimplified and sensationalized representations of the disaster by showcasing the complexities of the human experience. They reveal the importance of community solidarity,

⁴¹ Salvatore Tusa for the Vieux Carré Memoir Oral History Project, July 2, 2015, MSS 766, transcript, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA., 19.

the spontaneous mobilization of civilian volunteers, and the personal initiatives that played crucial roles in both the immediate response and long-term recovery.

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