

A.P.O.V. *

*Alumni Point of View

Missing New Orleans

Amidst rubble and ruin, the periwinkles are making a comeback on Bancroft Drive. By MARY BETH PENDLEY RAY, BA'81

I CAN'T THINK OF A POLITE OR PITHY answer when friends ask, "How was your trip to New Orleans?" I struggle for words to describe the devastation that has overtaken the Crescent City, the city where I was born and raised.

Two months after Hurricane Katrina, I returned with my mother to her home of 52 years. Mom had been back once already to survey the damage. I had seen the pictures, but nothing could have prepared me for seeing my childhood home destroyed.

Hurricane Katrina's wrath was merciless on the newer Lake Pontchartrain neighborhood where I grew up. Nature seemed to be reclaiming the swampy floodplain that our ancestors knew better than to try to control. Miles of destruction now mark the showdown between man and nature.

Most tourists think of New Orleans as the tawdry sleaze of Bourbon Street, swanky restaurant icons like Antoine's and Brennan's, garish casinos and sultry jazz clubs. More refined visitors reflect on the stately architecture of the Garden District or the charm of St. Charles Avenue streetcars.

My New Orleans, on the other hand, consisted of simpler pleasures, experienced during my 1960s childhood and more recently by my children: endless unsupervised bike rides on flat land; snowballs (called sno-

cones everywhere else), dripping in exotically flavored syrup like nectar, bubblegum and banana; neighborhood football games on lush, green front lawns unmarred by fences. We dangled from old oak trees and chased ducks around the lagoon in City Park. We sat on the seawall at the lake, brushing aside sun-bleached clam shells, eating "sloppy" po-boy sandwiches, and tossing chunks of French bread to feisty seagulls.

Palms, crape myrtles, sweet bay, and birds of paradise surrounded pretty brick homes in our comfortable enclave. The pungent scent of sweet olive, Confederate jasmine and gardenia enveloped our world, suspended in every balmy breeze. Blue jays, egrets, herons and squirrels thrived in the park-like setting.

My mother's home lies eight blocks from the lake, across the street from Bayou St. John, and exactly between the two levees that broke.

Today every plant is dead. We didn't think hell or high water could kill the ubiquitous banana trees, but sitting in two weeks of brackish water did. Lawns are brown, withered, and cluttered with detritus that resembles the bottom of a drained pond. Downed tree limbs and utility wires cover the streets and roofs.

Ugly brown watermarks deface every home, revealing the height of the ravaging flood water. Every home bears a cruel red "X," spray-

painted on the façade, indicating it was checked by relief workers for signs of life. Some markings indicate the number of dead bodies discovered inside.

We drive for miles and miles, my mother and I. Refrigerators sealed with duct tape perch on front lawns, indicating that optimists have returned to try to clean up their homes. A few residents are determined to defeat the mold and have gutted their homes down to the studs. Walls, insulation, sheetrock, carpeting and cabinets piled high have turned pristine gardens into dump sites. On other blocks, home owners have not tried to return. There are no cars, no people, no life. A military helicopter overhead occasionally breaks the deadly quiet.

The stench of mold and decay stays in one's nose, moves down to the throat, then becomes what locals call "the Katrina cough." Everyone's got it.

Friends and neighbors embrace and listen knowingly to each other's narratives—whether they evacuated before or after the hurricane, where they've spent the last few months, and when (or if) they plan to return. Even those whose homes escaped damage say they are depressed, that they feel in mourning for the city they loved and lost.

We found our favorite snowball stand in Lakeview. It was standing but flooded, closed for what may be forever. Hundreds of small cardboard signs cover the neutral ground along Harrison Avenue, Canal Boulevard and Wisner. They advertise mold remediation,



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tree cutting, stump grinding and demolition. My favorite sported a touch of local humor: “Trash Haulin’, Dawlin’.”

Lakeshore Drive is still cluttered with boats pushed to the shoulder to clear the road. The landmark yacht club, the oldest in the country, burned just days after Katrina. The charming red-roofed lighthouse of the 1800s, half blown away, half tilting precariously toward the murky water, leads one to anticipate the sucking sound of its final collapse. Two pelicans fly along the shore, quietly surveying their new world order. They know not to expect friendly handouts, because the picnickers are long gone.

In the days and weeks after the storm, my family and I were glued to the TV news. Returning from our summer vacation in Canada, we sat in a LaGuardia Airport pizzeria, craning to see CNN. We pleaded with the waiter to turn up the volume so we could find out whether Mom and her home were affected. Most of the coverage at that point focused on the Superdome and downtown.

Upon returning to our home in Washington, we learned that two acquaintances were going to New Orleans to cover the Katrina story for the *Financial Times* and the *Times of London*. We reached them on their cell phones and gave them directions to my mother’s house, describing where to find the hidden key (in hindsight, a ridiculous hope).

For 24 hours we had no idea where Mother was. She had grown complacent about evacuating. Several times each summer for decades, officials had warned of “the big one,” the hurricane that would wipe New Orleans off the map. The Saturday before Katrina, her next-door neighbor decided to evacuate to Lafayette, La., 150 miles west of New Orleans, and he offered Mother the high-rise hotel room he had reserved in an abundance of caution. She declined his offer, thinking the storm would change course, and that all the fuss was just the usual media hype. Finally, Sunday at noon she called to say that she

would check into the Wyndham Hotel downtown, just in case. That proved to be a decision that saved her life.

When she checked in Sunday afternoon, Mom was told that guests would have to come down to the windowless conference-room

come one year earlier, when my father lay in a nursing home suffering from leukemia. Scenes of the elderly and the dying stranded at the New Orleans International Airport felt unbearably personal, and I feared that had Daddy been alive, that’s where he’d be, with Mom at his side.

Back at the Wyndham, guests huddled but did not especially bond—it was a group brought together by necessity, not by choice. Guests were told they had to remain inside the hotel until further notice.

By Tuesday morning my mother could stand the quarantine no longer. She quietly opened a back door, slipped out, and was rewarded with a gorgeous fall day. In the first hours after a hurricane, there is an eerie quiet and a yellowish light not like any other. Then a cool breeze stirs the heavy air. Trees and power lines were down, but New Orleans seemed to have dodged a bullet. Dazed tourists and natives wandered downtown streets to survey the aftermath, which didn’t

seem so bad. But the sense of relief ended abruptly when a policeman stopped my mother near Harrah’s Casino and urged her to get out of town immediately. The levees had broken and the city was flooding.

As we watched the news from our Washington home, we could see flooding already on Canal Street. The Wyndham stands at the foot of Canal Street next to the river. As cameras panned away from the river and towards the lake, the water level rose rapidly. The bulk of the city sat below sea level, like a bowl, into which water and toxic sludge poured from all directions.

The next call came Tuesday afternoon. My 76-year-old mother was in her Volkswagen Passat with five hunky paramedics from California—hotel guests whom she had just met. She called from their cell phone as they weaved along back roads to Lafayette. Several days later Mom was able to get a flight from Baton Rouge to Washington, where we welcomed her with open arms, and disbelief.

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level at 11 p.m. because the windows would not withstand the projected 150 mile-per-hour winds. Her room was on the 23rd floor, so she came down early with a pillow and blanket, dreading having to climb either up or down 23 flights of stairs. After the electricity went out, the hotel’s generator ran for less than two hours, and stranded residents were without lights, water or a hot meal.

Monday morning Mom borrowed a hotel employee’s cell phone to say that she was alive, hungry, and looking forward to getting home. She hoped the power outage had not spoiled the crawfish bisque in her freezer.

Then we lost touch with her. The entire 504 area code was unreachable. When I called the hotel’s headquarters, they said they were unable to find out what was going on. News reports of looting, flooding, and forced evacuations to the Superdome brought forth alarming thoughts. Where was she, and how could she possibly get out? While we could not help but worry about Mom being alone, we were grateful that the hurricane had not

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country like this is not abnormal, after all. Perhaps it is simply wise.

Dr. Moffett is finishing off the last chapters of his life near his son. He doesn't "get out much," he says, but his knowledge of the town and the contents of his room belie this. Of the Apple computer in the corner, he says, "All I can do is word process. I can't do any of the other stuff. I don't get Internet because I'm illiterate!"

I wonder what it would be like to live without the distraction of the Internet. The Mayflower community, it seems, provides him with all the intellectual stimulation of a big-city cultural hub, thanks to nearby Grinnell College.

"We can go to musical programs on campus without charge, and you can audit most of the courses for free," says Alex. "Except during the summers we have a program once

a week, music or literature or some sort of lecture. I was on the committee for quite a few years and really enjoyed that, getting in touch with the professors and people who'd come in."

He launches into a passionate discussion of poets and poetry and music. He loves to read, he declares, loves John Crowe Ransom, Denise Levertov and Ted Koozer. He is an enthusiastic member of a poetry group in the Mayflower retirement complex.

"We have no organization," he says, smiling. "We just get together. There's a fair amount of talking, it's not strictly poetry. We try to bring our own work, but we *always* read from a good poet."

At that I smile, too, recalling nights from my senior year spent in dorm rooms, one of my writer friends reading aloud to a small group, all of us listening, slightly desperate, hoping to find a clue to uncovering

our own genius buried somewhere within the lines of a "good poet." None of us yet has found that clue. Some have gone searching for it in the stars of the skies of Argentina, others in law school, but our genius remains elusive to us yet.

Still, our hope remains, in part for me because of Dr. Moffett. It must have felt elusive, too, to a first-year medical student putting himself through school, ironing the chancellor's pants and weeding his garden. The pages of his life must then, in a time of market crashes and wars, have stretched before him white and daunting. Perhaps at times he staggered under the expectation of filling his pages. It is that possibility that drives me on, keeps me afloat in similarly turbulent times. My story will be written, too, and my family will surround me as I compose it. I simply must continue, each day from my small surface, to pick up the pen, and write.

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For the next two months, little direct information existed about our neighborhood. We gathered bits from neighbors who made their way back to the city despite the roadblocks manned by the National Guard. We agonized over when to return, and whether we should bring our children. After six weeks Mom finally agreed to shop for clothes. The two outfits she evacuated with were not warm enough for the mid-Atlantic autumn. Those purchases spoke to her acceptance that what remained in her New Orleans closet was ruined.

When she finally returned, her worst fears were confirmed. Doors and windows were swollen shut, and the house could only be entered by breaking windows. The force of the water inside the house created an unholy chaos. The coffeepot floated from the kitchen counter to my bed. A heavy oak table 5 feet in diameter floated over the breakfast bar from the den into the kitchen and separated into 50 pieces.

Dark stinking mold covered everything. Clouds of green dust sprayed out whenever something was moved. Century-old family photographs, World War II scrapbooks, and bank records dating back to the 1920s were

reduced to a soggy mess and covered in sludge. It all looked as though some giant monster had filled the house with water and shaken it like a snow globe.

No one really knows the next step. What's predictable is the morass of bureaucracy that surrounds every logistical detail: insurance claims, FEMA applications and contractor bids. Circular voicemail recordings that ultimately disconnect the caller, along with mounds of paperwork, plague every evacuee. Who makes the determination of renovation versus demolition? Who pays for it? Where does one live in the meantime?

But today Bourbon Street is back in business. The "World-Famous Love Acts" sign flashes garishly, and presumably employees are back to doing whatever they did before the storm to live up to their advertisement. Law-enforcement officers swarm the streets of the French Quarter, but their guns seem smaller and more discreet than in those weeks just after the storm. Café du Monde's mellow chicory-laced coffee tastes better than ever. Uptown restaurants are bouncing back, and Jefferson Parish schools are back in session.

As for the neighborhood where I grew up, its fate is unclear. After the flood an alligator

was spotted strolling down the middle of Bancroft Drive, adding credence to the belief that the area will be razed and allowed to revert to its pre-1878 status as a swamp. Others expect a developer to bulldoze the houses and create a gated community of McMansions, built on stilts to avoid another flood.

Mom has returned to New Orleans to stay. She is living with friends Uptown while she hunts for a furnished apartment in the French Quarter. Strangely enough, almost every piece of her china and crystal survived the perilous wind and waves intact. My mother is determined that the city will make a comeback. And who knows? Maybe it will. Just yesterday she found periwinkles in the backyard, pushing their way through the broken glass and grime.

When I left New Orleans to fly back to Washington, I realized as my plane rose that the swimming pools are black and the roofs are blue, covered in protective tarps. But by the time we got to 20,000 feet, I smiled at the gentle curve of the Mississippi River below, glistening beside green rectangles of carefully tended sugar-cane fields. Despite it all, man and nature were peacefully coexisting again, at least until the next hurricane.