

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Our Director of Oral History at the Center for Public History, Ernesto Valdés, conceived the idea of doing a commemorative issue on Houston's response to Hurricane Katrina almost immediately after the storm. He began the interviews in 2006 and completed the final one just before his death earlier this year. This issue, published on the fifth anniversary of Katrina's landfall on August 29, 2005, is the product of Ernesto's vision.

Mayor Bill White and Judge Robert Eckels took the lead in coordinating the efforts to respond to the needs of several hundred

thousand people who came to the Houston area to escape Katrina's devastation. Mayor White kept an exacting schedule, but at the same time, remained sensitive to the needs of the evacuees. His direct and humane approach set the tone for all of those in the region who opened their hearts and even their homes to those displaced. For example, the Hurricane Katrina Relief Working Group minutes dated September 7, 2005, quoted White as saying: "A person at the back of the line seeking benefits needs to know the same information as the guy at the front. We don't want someone waiting to find out they don't meet the necessary requirements. That's not how we do busi-

ness in Houston, Texas."

During a time of great human need, our city provided a model of how strong leaders can help harness the best efforts of government, business, and private organizations to respond to emergencies. Houston's response to Katrina also reminds us that most effective emergency responses in America are essentially local, and that they rely on the tradition of volunteerism that has served our nation well throughout its history.

On June 7, 2010, Mayor White provided his reflections for *Houston History* on how the city stepped up to provide assistance to the many in need.

## MAYOR BILL WHITE REMEMBERS KATRINA ON THE STORM'S FIFTH ANNIVERSARY



Former Houston Mayor, Bill White. Photo courtesy of Bill White.

It was obvious to me when the levies broke that we were going to be a sanctuary for our fellow Americans who had lost everything. . . . I understood that we were the closest big city that would become a new home for many, many people. . . . No city, no community, had the experience of dealing with 200,000 people that were not just seeking refuge from a storm but had lost their city. . . . I was in problem solving mode. . . . [and] knew that if we appealed to the better nature of our citizens that we would get a very broad and deep, committed response to that, which we did. I think the whole world watched and wondered as people within our community came together at a time when the response within the state of Louisiana and the federal government was not very efficient. . . .

Even before the storm, when it was clear that [the evacuees] would be here for some time, I articulated the simple policies of our city. We would want to treat our neighbors as we would like to be treated, and that meant we would give people the chance to live with independence and dignity by working for employment [and] getting their kids in school; for those who were seniors or disabled, we would be their safety net. . . . There were some naysayers at the outset; but we got broad sup-

port, particularly the support that crossed party lines, the support from the faith-based community, and from the business community. As businesses saw . . . what other businesses were doing, and being asked to do, . . . much of the initial opposition dissipated. People saw this as an opportunity for us to do something that was right for our country as well as for our fellow Americans.

We showed that you can be . . . competent and efficient and compassionate at the same time . . . Too often in the political arena the ideas of compassion and efficiency are not married in the way that we were able to put them together in the efforts after Katrina. We also believe in self sufficiency and work, and not dependency and entitlement, that is part of our heritage in Texas and belief in a limited government. . . . When I met with the evacuees, I emphasized that there were roles and responsibilities that we each had. Our responsibility, which we undertook, was to make sure that people had shelter over their heads, utilities, furnishings, [access to] transit lines, and an opportunity for employment if they were able bodied. Their responsibility was to get their kids in school, look forward and not back. We would help people return [to New Orleans]; but if they weren't able to return, then, to seek employment within this community and to help us identify those people who were engaged in criminal activity, which is a violation of the rights of others. That was a Houston style of giving people a hand up, not a hand out.

Sometimes I had to remind our fellow citizens . . . when somebody was living in the shelter, they had as much right to live here as anyone else in this community, that most Houstonians had come from somewhere else. If somebody was in a shelter, then we were in their home, not vice versa. . . . There were other parts of the country that segregated people into trailer homes. At one time, FEMA wanted to herd people into a large cruise ship in Galveston, which would have the tendency to isolate people. Dr. Ken Maddox from Ben Taub said that after these mentally traumatic disasters you see a spike in suicides about a

week to three weeks out because people had left everything—their housing, their families, their neighborhoods, their employment. Once the adrenalin and the trauma were over, then there was a feeling of helplessness. But you didn't see that here because people felt they were part of the community, that others cared for them, and that they could have a chance to get on with their lives. . . .

I was particularly touched by several comments I received from people, mainly older people who were African American, who I met in the year after Katrina. . . . The first person who shared her story said that in her lifetime, she had seen many changes. She had seen laws change, she had seen the end of official segregation; but deep in her heart, she doubted. She wondered whether attitudes had really changed . . . to really live the ideal that every person is created in the image of God and is no more worthy than another; she wondered if we had emerged from that history of racism in our city. When she saw the response of people taking [people from] very different backgrounds, income levels, and ethnicities into their homes, and the outpouring of support where so many Houstonians simply saw fellow Americans—even while the media was trying to characterize it as something racial. . . .—she said, "You know, this has changed." . . . She told me, "You have really forged a real multi-ethnic city." . . .

[Houston has] a tradition of civic leadership with mayors going back to Mayor [Louie] Welch who thought that civil rights, and certainly racial diversity, could be a strength of our city and not a liability. We had a strong faith-based community that played an important role in desegregation . . . Even more diverse are the people we have, Houstonians who were citizens . . . who had come from all over the world. We are more diverse than we have ever been before. Many people saw that as a strength. . . . When people realized how much they had in common, or could have in common, with various people who did not have a home to go back to, the whole world applauded the way that we responded. . . . That is an enduring legacy. 🍷