

SURVIVING KATRINA AND RITA IN HOUSTON: Conversations with Shari Smothers, Marie Barney, Glenda Harris, and Linda Jeffers

Two major hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, forcing approximately 250,000 people into the Houston area, with as many as 100,000 remaining here. Dr. Carl Lindahl, the Martha Gano Professor of English at the University of Houston, and Pat Jasper, who founded Texas Folklife Resources, led the effort to collect their oral histories—the first large-scale project in which the survivors of a major disaster have taken the lead in documenting it. The survivors received training and compensation to record fellow survivors' stories of the storm, their memories of home, and their ongoing struggles to build new communities in exile. Their paychecks helped fill an obvious need for income, but more importantly, their training and documentary experience enhanced their prospects for building new careers. For more information on Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston visit www.katrinaandrita.org. Included are a few of their reflections on the City of Houston.

SHARI SMOTHERS, one of the survivor-interviewers, recalled how participating in this project affected her:

Once it set in that we were not going to be able to return home, families began to get on with the necessary things . . . Things began to happen that surprised me a little. There were fights breaking out at some schools amongst the children. New Orleans children fought with Houston children. . . . A particularly offensive news clip that aired then still sticks with me. It featured a woman bitterly spitting out, "They need to go back where they came from!" That segment was looped over and again in the news trailer, reinforcing the sensationalist predisposition of the media, those cliffhanger ratings chasers: "... Details at six . . ."

This parent wished to send back a large group of people to New Orleans when most of the neighborhoods had no running water, no electricity, schools incapable of reopening, severely impaired healthcare facilities. She wished New Orleans parents and children to return to an unclean city, unhealthy living conditions, and unknown health hazards. It's my hope that she hadn't considered such facts.

As late as May 2006, I heard a news headline state, "Houston's crime rate increases by double digits. New Orleans evacuees may be to blame. Details at ten." . . . I thought of my seventy-year-old parents who never robbed anyone, their neighbors who worked all their lives, and my friends who were employed in various fields as productive members of the New Orleans community. Only a week earlier I spoke over the phone with an employee of my complex. The woman stated that she "hated to say it," but the break-in the complex had experienced was probably the result of the people of New Orleans. . . . She had no idea . . . that I was one of her "suspects." . . .

I was advised at the job placement agency to keep any mention of New Orleans off my résumé to stand a better chance of landing an interview. . . . deny[ing] an integral part of my life.



A survivor herself, Shari Smothers took part in the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston project as an interviewer, embracing the opportunity to let people tell their stories. Photo courtesy of Shari Smothers.

. . . People buying into these stereotypes and distortions are not people who will be changed if I run around with a sign saying, "We're not all bad; I didn't do it." . . .

AFTER SEEING the ad for a job with the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston project, Shari Smothers went to the presentation and immediately wanted to take part.

I liked the idea of being a part of something that sought to give us each a voice when it seemed no one wanted to give us audience individually. It presented a venue to have our stories heard for all time by anyone willing to hear them. . . . The Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston project seeks to provide that forum, to collect and preserve those memories in the Library of Congress, the University of Houston archives, and other useful repositories. And I get to be a part of that. . . .

As a member of this project, I was charged with the responsibility of finding and interviewing twelve people . . . Through this project, I've met some good people who were separated from places and people familiar to them. . . . As they told their stories, I watched and listened as they were moved to tears in the retelling. I traveled with tissues to each interview because I could never be sure what to expect. I heard them find joy and laughter in the midst of the grief. I heard them speak with resigned acceptance as they talked about feeling as though they'd suffered a death. And I heard them say how their faith managed—and how it continues—to sustain them throughout the ordeal . . .

When I was asked to share about only one of the twelve interviews that I took part in, I didn't know which one to pick because I find significance in all the voices, heard and not: the voices that are heard in bits and pieces, and those that have something to say but not the courage, are represented in all that we are doing. I decided to share the interview done with my godmother. Hers is a story of great loss just prior to Katrina, a story of surviving and continuing, with no time for satisfactory grieving.

MARIE D. BARNEY, who had buried her husband just a few days before Katrina, was interviewed by Smothers on April 11, 2006.

We didn't realize that this storm was as near as it was and that it was actually going to hit our area. . . . We started at around eleven thirty or twelve o'clock, and we must've reached Houston probably about four thirty the next morning. . . . We had reserved our hotel suite so we did have a place to rest and to stay. . . .

I did find a church which was a very wonderful church with a pastor that was just outstanding. But, it was a mega church, it was this huge church. I was not accustomed to that; I was accustomed to my own little small church where I knew everybody and everything. . . . I did find a church in my denomination where I occasionally went . . . between the two that's what . . . I guess you could say [are] my church homes. . . .

Between that and finding my way around Houston, that was the next



Marie Barney shared her story of great loss, surviving, and continuing to go forward.

Photo courtesy of Marie Barney.

thing because if you know New Orleans, [it] has one Interstate that you get on and you pass straight through. . . . Because if you were on the Interstate, you were just going in one direction, coming back in one direction. . . . When I got here to Houston, the Interstate looked like spaghetti to me. . . .

I guess one of the plusses about being here was that I found that my medical care was pretty readily available. I knew had I gone any place else, I probably wouldn't have gotten some things done as quickly as I did. With coming here, that was a blessing because I had surgery on my back. And I had some other little challenges, and they were corrected or worked on, that kind of thing. . . .

Some [New Orleans] friends I've hooked up with here in Houston . . . I guess you count your blessings and everything. And I think Katrina, trying to just survive those first few days kind of took my mind away from my husband a whole lot. I don't know if I ever really had any grief time, to tell you the truth because things moved so fast. You just had no time.

GLENDA JONES STEVENSON HARRIS was born in New Orleans and grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward area, where she remained and raised her own family. She saw the area transcend from a neighborhood of low income homeowners and working class people to a "community that was just left abandoned for vagrants." She became a hospital nurse, always putting needs of children first. Before Katrina she was appointed to the American Red Cross Board of Brother's Keeper that dealt with hurricane evacuations. She had never forgotten that the National Guard had brought in 18,000 body bags, anticipating the elderly could not be evacuated in a timely manner for Hurricane Ivan. After her interview, Harris became director of the Katrina Citizens Leadership Corps, a branch of the Children's Defense Fund. In 2007, her work with Katrina children brought her back to New Orleans, where she also served as co-chair of the New Orleans Industrial Development Board and as Associate Minister of Ebenezer Baptist Church. She died in New Orleans on February 2, 2010, at the age of fifty-two.

We were blessed and we were fortunate [for] every opportunity of resources that Houstonians offered to us—churches and non-profit organizations—I was very pleased. People were very helpful. I went to the grocery store and people were telling me, "Look, you know, if you need some food, my church is giving out food. If you need some clothing . . ." And when they would see me with my small grandbabies, it was amazing. I had people to walk up to me and give me twenty-dollar bills, thirty dollars.

I was in a grocery store line in Kroger and a lady said, "Let



Glenda Harris had been an advocate for children all of her life and was committed to community service in New Orleans and Houston after Katrina.

Photo courtesy of Alice McNamara.

me pay for everything in your basket." . . . When they got all their milk, they bought their Pampers. Bought everything they needed, and I was saying, "No, I'm all right," and they'd say, "No, we have to do something." . . .

There were people in the VA Hospital. I went there to get my uncle some other medicines. A lady was there letting people use



Glenda Harris at the University of Houston.

Photo courtesy of Alice McNamara.

her cell phone because people's cell phones were not working from New Orleans. . . . Sitting there with tears in her eyes. "I got to do something. Take my cell phone. . . . Call or do anything that you need to do. Don't worry about if it's long distance . . ."

I think the greatest thing about Houston, Texas, for us as a matter of evacuees was that before the federal government or any governmental agency could say anything, the people out of their hearts, in Houston, reached out their arms, and reached out their hands, and reached out their heart and say, "I understand. If it's not but by the grace of God, it could have been us rather than you all. So we—we're grateful and we're going to do all we can to help you." . . .

I saw a young couple out of Spring Tabernacle Church take another young couple that I referred to them and brought them to Galaxy [sic] Furniture store and bought them every room and piece of furniture that they needed. And I know that had to be very expensive . . . It was amazing to me. I stood in the middle of Gallery Furniture store crying. And no one could understand, but I realize now that I don't cry about what I lost, because I cry about the miracles that I saw. . . . Our legacies ought to be about how we touch the lives of people, how we make a difference—because that's our truest legacy. Because when we're buried in a grave in the ground, we can't take a house with us, we can't take a car, but what we can take with us is the lives of people that we touched and how we've made a difference. . . .

Another minister called me . . . said, "Glenda, I know you're working with some families there in Houston. Let me do something to help them. . . . let me pay the rent for two families." And so I saw the blessings in the word of God come true, that when you give just to the least of these, He will double the offering. And so I saw that over and over and over again. . . .

As God started moving me throughout Houston, I went to the Reliant Center, I went to George [R.] Brown, and I found people

that had been through the shelter process at the Superdome, who were angry, who were upset. I was able to direct them to resources that helped them and even brought some of them to the facilities that helped them. It made a difference for me, it gave me something to do more than just to think about what I had lost. . . . I left my house in the morning, left the hotel—or I call it my house—the hotel in the morning at eight or nine o'clock and I didn't get back till five o'clock in the evening, like I was on a regular job. . . .

I thank God . . . that I had the appropriate insurance . . . it allowed me to be free, because I was able to work with my insurance very easily, but it allowed me to be free to help other people who were having problems with their insurance company, or who didn't have insurance, to assist in with applying for FEMA, or knowing where to go to get assistance that they needed. I was so grateful to see the Disaster Recovery Center open, because it was like I had a regular taxicab bringing people [there]. . . . I remember one time, the lady I met at Spring Tabernacle Church and she said that their church [was] going to help a few families. And I started bringing people to the church, and she said, "Well, Glenda, I just got a question: how many people did you tell, that we were doing assistance?" I say, "Well, you know, I got a big mouth, so I tell everybody when I find something good, and I find people who have a heart." . . .

I love Houston; I love the people of Houston. They've done a wonderful job. But I know the assignment that God has for me, for all that I've done here, He has prepared me to go back to rebuild that city [New Orleans]. . . . Anything that I can [do] to contribute to this city, I'll do. I think that my family for the most part, most of the younger people in my family, my young daughters have found great opportunities here, and want to stay here in Houston. And I applaud that. I applaud them wanting to move forward and be progressive.

LINDA JEFFERS was from Gentilly area. A widow, she had owned her own business since 1984 in which she assisted people in acquiring licenses, most often for restaurants and bars. Her work to organize Katrina survivors continues to the present day. In Houston, she worked with the grassroots movement America Speaks. Returning to New Orleans in 2008, she has worked with the Rebuilding Lives Coalition and as an advocate for the homeless in the Equity and Inclusion movement. She is currently working with victims of the BP Gulf Coast oil disaster.

[After being evacuated by the National Guard,] I got on that last bus . . . They would not tell us where they were going, but they said, “We’re going to get you out of the city.” . . . out of those thirty-two buses, the bus I was on and one other bus, we got to Houston. . . . And that’s how I ended up in the Astrodome. . . . Red Cross gave me a cot. And there was some kids that was sitting like up in the bleacher part. So I got them to come down there and went back to Red Cross, got them some beds. . . . I still had that lady from Honduras [who I had helped rescue], her and her baby with me, and we were able to make a call to her husband—some family to come from New York to get her . . . That’s where I found myself.

There was a group that came into the Astrodome called the Metropolitan Organization [TMO], and they said if anybody wants to have a voice, have any problems, they told us to come to the medical part in the Astrodome. To come up there and be there for two o’clock. I said, “Wow!” Because at this moment in time . . . there was no means of real communication. Had a cell phone that was dead as they could get it. . . . I had my bible . . . And I had a purse. And that’s what I—that was me. . . . And what I had on. That’s all I had.

I had started moving around the Astrodome, meeting people. And I used to sit up all night with everybody else to go talk to the elderly because at eleven o’clock, they would turn the lights—not all the way off, but turn them down. And seem when they would do that, that everybody would sit up. . . . I would get up and walk all night. Met officers, security, whatever. Talk to them. The volunteers and everybody was very kind to me. But nobody still didn’t know what was going to happen.

On the same day, that the Metropolitan Organization came. And Oprah Winfrey, T. D. Jakes, all your big boys. Different movie stars. Throughout that, Hillary—that would come in,

moving out. Jessie Jackson. But they was just doing—like an entourage. But still, nothing for comfort for people. . . . I want to go up there at two o’clock and find out what them people are talking about. Because I just felt like it was going to be a break through. And it was. Because we got there—they say that they had been deemed authorized by the Mayor of Houston and Judge Eckels to find out what could they do to make people comfortable there. . . . They had about 22,000 people in the Astrodome. And only eighty people went up there because everybody else was excited about the stars. . . .



After Hurricane Katrina, Linda Jeffers continued her work to organize Katrina survivors in Houston and in New Orleans, where she returned in 2008.

Photo courtesy of Alice McNamara.

Kids—at this point in time they been in the Astrodome. So they [were] like—oh my God—bouncing off every wall they had. . . . So they set up a play area right outside the Astrodome. And through TMO they made this possible for us. And we asked for them to do a daycare. They did a daycare right down by medical to give the mothers a break. All of this happened within twenty-four hours after the request.

[A few days later,] they did arrange a meeting, TMO, I met with Mayor White, Judge Eckels and Mr. Costello. He was the gentleman

that was over FEMA. . . . They asked, “what did we want?” So I spoke for people from the city, from New Orleans. . . . The only thing I told them was we needed money. Mr. Costello asked—he say, “I don’t know what we’ll be able to do, but we might be able to get a grant through Congress.” . . . Everybody’s cell phone was being turned off. . . . They appealed and they allowed our cell phones to remain on. . . . Some people phones, on as much as a year. But they didn’t charge us. That was the only means of being able to connect with somebody else was that cell phone.

Since January of 2006 and coming into 2007, being here in Houston, I’ve had an opportunity to work very closely with people through social services agencies, such as Catholic Charities. . . . Jewish Family Services, United Way—those people worked. And Neighborhood Centers—those people gave me access to the services and the people throughout Houston area. . . .

I petitioned to congress-persons coming out the latter part of 2006 to ask that they come together from both Louisiana and Texas, united in order to be able to do things . . . I’m working with America Speaks that will allow us an opportunity to have a voice in rebuilding. And I am going to D.C. and I will go before Congress to petition them, to lobby them, to create something that will pick up the disabled and the elderly who don’t have an opportunity to have an opportunity. And I love you. 