

Beyond Social Justice: Black Lives Matter and Houston Relief Efforts

By Christopher Kessinger

Activists with Black Lives Matter-Houston and Project Curate, Brandi Holmes and Secunda Joseph formulated their own responses to Hurricane Harvey. The two began using social media — most notably the chat platform Discord — to coordinate a response during the storm. While the floodwaters still rose, they joined a Discord server that acted as a dispatch service for civilian rescue efforts. They were particularly motivated to help by the lack of resources allocated to Northeast Houston. “People I knew were stuck,” said Joseph. People sent SOS messages, and it was up to Holmes, Joseph, and others like them to ensure that a rescuer was sent to their location. The process quickly grew in scale. “It even became where [we] were like on shifts,” Holmes explained. She felt a moral duty to participate. “My faith practice doesn’t allow me to turn a blind eye to somebody in need.”¹

Once the waters had receded to the point that they could drive to the George R. Brown Convention Center, which the city opened as a shelter, they went to volunteer there in person. It was far from perfect. “[We saw] a lot of black and brown people there,” Joseph observed, and the two women were horrified at the way the media treated the evacuees as a spectacle. Holmes and Joseph saw reporters shoving microphones into the faces of people stepping off the bus, trying to get an immediate story rather than respecting their privacy in a traumatic situation. They also found that donors and volunteers, though well-intentioned, often failed to meet the needs of the people they were trying to help. Their time as



Brandi Holmes and Secunda Joseph spoke to Houston History about what motivated them to help those in need during Hurricane Harvey.

Photo courtesy of Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey.

organizers had taught them the importance of listening to the community directly. “We’re not saviors for a neighborhood. I don’t have all the answers,” said Holmes. Instead of making assumptions, they tried to talk with the people they were helping.²

The efforts of activists like Holmes and Joseph were not well-publicized, either. A hoax website put out a piece claiming that Black Lives Matter activists in Houston were blocking ambulances from helping people; some smaller right-wing websites picked it up and presented it as a real story. Within a few days, the articles had been shared to a Facebook audience of over twelve million viewers.³ The lie got far more attention than the real work that Houston activists were doing to help their neighbors in need.

The two Black Lives Matter activists saw the post-Harvey devastation as emblematic of the injustices they struggled to correct. “Even the way people were picked up and where they were dropped off was different, right? The separation of who goes to what shelter, right? And then, not only that, the things that were set up at particular shelters [were unequal],” Joseph asserted. They saw Houston’s black community inordinately harmed by Harvey, to the point that many people were still trying to deal with the consequences of the storm more than a year afterwards. They saw their interview with the Center for Public History’s Resilient Houston:

Documenting Hurricane Harvey as part of their project — they wanted to make “enough noise to where these folks can get help.”⁴

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News crews set up outside of the George R. Brown Convention Center shelter. Brandi Holmes and Secunda Joseph noted that reporters were insensitive to the stress and needs of evacuees, pushing to get an interview the moment evacuees arrived, which added to their distress.

Photo courtesy of Diana J. Rodriguez.