WIND

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Six degrees of unification

We are Wake Forest. And we are New Orleans.

Stories by David Fyten

WHEN JOHN WHITE OF NEW ORLEANS VISITED Winston-Salem in 1991, he was introduced to the woman he would marry—Amy Baldwin ('91)—by his hometown friend, Richard Currence ('89), younger son of Dick ('61) and Becky McDonald ('61) Currence.

When Bill Marks ('66)—who had graduated from Wake Forest with Amy's parents, Woody ('66) and Joy Brumbaugh ('66) Baldwin, and whose own son, Bo ('91), was a classmate of Amy—came to New Orleans in 1990 to head one of the city's leading banks, Becky Currence, noting his college affiliation in a newspaper article announcing his appointment, called to welcome him.

When Bob Johnson ('69), then general manager of the Louisiana Superdome, attended an alumni reception in New Orleans sometime in the early nineties, Becky went out of her way to introduce herself. When a group of Wake Forest students spent their spring break this March volunteering in New Orleans, the Currences treated them to dinner. And when Becky discovered that a minister and relative newcomer to the city named Ray Cannata ('90) was shepherding a flock of rebuilding projects, she resolved to meet him and learn more about his mission.

AGAINST the WIND

PHOTO BY CHUCK COOK / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Nearly every Friday that they're around, Kit Roth and John Monlezun have an informal cocktail party on the driveway next to where their home stood on Lakeshore Drive in Mandeville before Hurricane Katrina. The house had to be demolished and the lot is overgrown with weeds. Next door, a new, raised house is almost finished.

College affiliation can be a potent adhesive, especially when it is applied by an inveterate networker who is as devoted to her alma mater as Becky Currence is. But in "post-K" New Orleans, as its denizens today delineate time after Katrina, perhaps only food and music bond its people as immutably as survivorship. Becky's sense of kinship with her fellow New Orleans alumni today surely stems as much from having shared an ordeal as it does from having shared a college. For that matter, can anyone who endured the deluge feel anything but fraternity with perfect strangers in Gentilly, Lakeview, Mid-City, Broadmoor, and the Lower Ninth Ward?

Combined, Katrina and its little sister, Rita, constituted the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history by far, causing $150 billion in damage. As grim as its images were, television simply could not adequately convey the misery and desperation the storms wrought a month apart in late summer and early fall 2005.

The worst was visible after the vile swill that submerged 80 percent of the city receded. Its once-lush and verdant landscape had withered and browned, as if caught on film in sepia tone. Its venerable live oaks, which had somehow survived the brackish onslaught that wiped out the magnolias and other varieties, had been stripped at their tops by the winds, permitting harsh sunlight to penetrate previously virgin shade. Cracked mud caked everything from boulevards to bedrooms. Mangled structures slumped piggyback on cars. Uprooted trees wove crowns and garlands. A river barge rested in a backyard. Public safety personnel went about their macabre task of searching houses for corpses (they would find close to 1,500) as troops battled to quash the rampant pillaging and shootings.

Out of a pre-K population of 434,000, only 158,000 still lived in Orleans Parish in January 2006. Of those that remained, many were crammed into the 81,000 FEMA trailers that sprouted like fungus from the sodden soil and that would come to be as reviled as their namesake: the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Approximately 800,000 people in the seven-parish metropolitan area were forced to relocate to far-flung locales in America's greatest diaspora since the Dust Bowl days of the Great Depression. An outsider can scarcely imagine the emotional damage an exodus of this magnitude would wreak on a city in which almost 80 percent of its habitants had been born and raised. Left behind to be disposed of was some 40 million tons of trash—

thirty-four years' worth of normal waste generation—including 1.5 million "white goods" appliances and 350,000 vehicles.

Happily, television still fails to do the city justice—only now, to its persistent recovery. Although most of the Ninth Ward is eerily empty, with block after block of bulldozed lots, and whole neighborhoods in Lakeview and Gentilly remain dotted with the shells of gutted dwellings, the Big Easy today has a detectable twinkle in its eye and liveliness in its step. In the Broadmoor neighborhood, the bowl of the concave city in which twelve feet and more of floodwater had collected, "piles of progress"—rubble from renovation work—await pickup. Muck is no more, brown has morphed to green, and people have returned home, raising the population to over 70 percent of pre-K levels in the city proper.

Especially heartening has been the influx of twenty-somethings from all over the nation who had come to volunteer, became infatuated with the city, and returned to make it their home and be part of the rebuilding. New Orleanians even have a name for them: YURPs (for Young Urban Recovery Professionals).

If perception is everything, then it is especially so in New Orleans, a farrago of fantasy and contrasts. Whereas some look at New Orleans and see only crime, hedonism, and impoverishment, others perceive determination, compassion, and collaboration—the kinder facets of human nature. Its inhabitants watched the good times roll away with the wind and they are bound and determined to roll them back.

Each reopening of a beloved restaurant that had been flooded—Mandina's, Commander's Palace, the Camellia Grill, Dooky Chase's—has been cause for celebration, not only because New Orleans adores food like no place else, but also because each one has symbolically represented a new high water mark in the healing process. Its public school system, the worst in the country before being washed away by the flooding, has been supplanted by the promise of the charter school system. A seminal spirit of community, cooperation, and grass roots activism is pervading the city as palpably as its infamous humidity in summer's high heat.

Still, sober heads elsewhere wonder whether New Orleans can or even should be rebuilt and protected. Already as much as seventeen feet below sea level, the city is sinking by as much as an inch a year. Since 1932, Louisiana has lost some 2,000 square miles of coastal lands—the seventh largest eroding wetland in the world, bigger than the entire state of Delaware—and the loss rate is quickening. Global warming is melting polar ice faster than at any time since the end of the last ice age, and ocean levels could rise by as much as twenty feet over the next century. And warming seas will be incubators and energizers of more frequent and violent storms. As Bob Dylan wrote, you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing.

PHOTO BY AMANDA MCCOY / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

A line stretches out to the sidewalk as people wait anxiously for the doors to open at Camellia Grill on Saturday, April 21, 2007. Doors opened at 8 o'clock to let patrons in for the first time since Hurricane Katrina.

AGAINST the WIND

PHOTO BY ELLIS LUCIA / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Waitress Tiffany Manchester (right) takes orders from a table full of customers. Mandina's, the Mid-City neighborhood restaurant at 3800 Canal St., opened its doors to the public Wednesday, February 7, 2007, for the first time since being flooded by Hurricane Katrina more than 17 months earlier.

Although the city's defenses have been buttressed since Katrina, they are still unlikely to withstand another Category 3 storm. It would take decades and an incalculable financial investment to protect it from Category 4 or 5 hurricanes, of which the probability will only increase as climatological conditions change. Can distanced observers be faulted for advocating such radical and previously unthinkable solutions as abandoning one of America's most historic and loved cities?

To New Orleanians, the glass is always half full at least, and to them the only true impediment to full recovery is the indifference or downright hostility of the naysayers and doomsdayers. And there is this to consider: if we are hostile or indifferent to New Orleans' plight, are we so at our collective peril? Half or more of the country's population lives on or close to its coasts and is therefore vulnerable to the very hazards Louisiana confronts. Even those who live away from the oceans and gulf are not out of harm's way entirely. In January of 2007, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers listed 146 inland levees, from Washington to Pennsylvania and Arkansas to New York, that are seriously flawed. By turning our backs to the predicament of New Orleans, are we denying that it is ours as well?

Whatever side you take in the Battle of New Orleans, we hope you will find inspiration in the following six stories about the lives and work of Becky, Bill, Bob, Amy, Ray, and the student volunteers, and trust that you will bond with them. We are Wake Forest, after all.

And we are New Orleans.

KEN BENNETT