ABSTRACT

This article is based on a keynote presentation delivered at the Alabama Poverty Project Lifetime of Learning Summit at the University of Montevallo on September 30, 2011. Conference organizers asked for the perspective of a survivor of a significant natural disaster, for information regarding Louisiana's recovery from hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the short- and long-term, and for advice on re-building and recovery within the framework of poverty eradication. This paper details the author's experiences in the 2005 hurricanes and lessons learned through subsequent community-engagement efforts.

Community at the Center of the Storm

Marybeth Lima

Before hurricane Katrina, I was steady and confident in my job as an associate professor in the department of biological & agricultural engineering at LSU. I had been doing service-learning since 1998, and I worked very closely with the staff from the Center for Community Engagement, Learning and Leadership, or CCELL. In working closely with CCELL and with my community, I had developed the LSU Community Playground Project.

I teach a required, first-year biological engineering design course in which my students partner with local public elementary schools to work with the true experts at play, the children at the schools, to develop dream playground designs at those schools. My class consists of two to three sections of students, and each section is assigned a separate public school. College students work collaboratively in teams of three to four people with the elementary school students, teachers, and school administrators, and sometimes parents or school improvement teams, to develop playground designs. They present their designs, get resulting input from community partners, make design changes accordingly, and complete a design report (and poster detailing their design, which resides at the school). In this way, each school has seven to nine different designs for a new playground.

After the semester ends, my playground research and design team continues to collaborate with partner schools to consolidate the different design ideas into a single one, and to develop fundraising and grant writing plans to obtain the funding necessary to build the playground. Once this occurs, we typically install the playground design on a volunteer basis; approximately one-third of my students return as volunteers to build the playground that they helped to design on paper.

In July 2005, I had begun a sabbatical with the governor's office, trying to figure out ways to bring better play spaces to public schools at the state level. After hurricane Katrina, my sabbatical plans were finished. I never met with the governor's office contact again; in a phone call shortly after the storm, he said that all focus had shifted to recovery efforts, and I was done.

I am a survivor of the edge of Hurricane Katrina, and I know that it was not even close to the same as going through the guts of that huge storm. What struck me about going through it, time and time again, was the interesting ways in which the kindness of people, to those they knew, but especially to those that they didn't, spun off into a fabric that sheltered many of us with the best of humanity through our experiences. Although this kindness didn't happen for everyone in some very notable ways, here are several examples:

- Louisiana is known as the sportsman's paradise, and in parts of south Louisiana, there are as many boats as cars. Lots of places in our state are accessible only by boat. As soon as the last of the winds blew through New Orleans, the folks with boats in south Louisiana who were not impacted by the storm, those in Cajun country, marshaled their resources and resolve and set sail for New Orleans. In the week following Katrina, this group of men and women and their boats plucked some 9,000 people from rooftops and other flooded structures and delivered them safely to dry land. This group of people is known as the Cajun navy. I am confident that they did more to keep the death toll of the storm down than any other single action in the aftermath of Katrina.
- My mother retired to Long Beach, Mississippi in the spring of 2004; she bought a house from my next door neighbor's mother, who was a real estate agent for coastal Mississippi. My mother evacuated to Baton Rouge to stay with us two days before Katrina; my next door neighbor's family stayed behind in Pass Christian, MS. They had survived hurricanes Betsy and Camille, so why not this one? By the time they decided to heed the mandatory evacuation order, it was about eight hours before the storm reached the Mississippi coastline, and strong wind and rain bands were already pelting the area. They drove eight miles in three hours on congested roads before deciding to take up a stranger on an offer she had made through the friend of a friend, a woman who owned a double wide trailer in Poplarville, Mississippi, and let it be known that anyone stranded on the road was welcome there. My neighbor's parents pulled into that rural place in pitch darkness, torrential rain, and snapping pine trees. The woman walked out into the storm to greet them and to help bring in their bags. There were almost 20 people inside that trailer and the woman had prepared a smorgasbord of fried everything for her guests. The trailer rocked, rattled, and shook all night, and cracking trees were a constant aural companion, as was wind and rain. "I had lost my appetite, and I wasn't eating a thing," my neighbor's father said, "but I was so thankful to that woman. She didn't even know us, and she saved our lives."

Katrina was a complicated storm; I've heard people say that Katrina was two storms, and I think that's true in so many ways: the Katrina that hit south Florida, and the one that hit Louisiana; the "direct impact" Katrina (the tip of southern Florida, coastal Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama) and the "indirect impact" Katrina (levee failure in New Orleans); the Katrina that affected the poor, and the Katrina that affected the affluent.

In Baton Rouge, we prepared for Katrina as we did for any hurricane, by battening down all things that could move (potted plants, lawn furniture, etc.) and stocking up on non-perishable supplies. Katrina hit in the middle of the night and went on for many hours. We listened to

branches raining down on the roof, but the windows didn't break. When the TV went out that morning, I turned on the battery-powered radio and tuned in to NPR - the station wasn't there. Late August and early September is the height of hummingbird season in Baton Rouge; during this time, millions of ruby throated hummingbirds grace our communities on their way to Central America. I left up a hummingbird feeder away from the house and the birds fed there throughout the storm. Katrina picked up and flung 110 ton pieces of concrete bridge in the same storm that tiny hummingbirds navigated with seeming ease.

The aftermath of Katrina was very different from hurricanes I'd experienced during my nine years in Louisiana at that point; we had no cell phone communication for two days, no power for three days, no gasoline available for five days, and an acute gas shortage for five weeks thereafter. Our population doubled within a period of approximately two weeks.

A good friend of ours named Dorothy lived in a remote area about 15 miles from Baton Rouge. She called us on our land line on our third day without power and invited us to her house. We jumped at the invitation, not just because of her company, but because somehow, she had power. The night before Dorothy called, when we had gone to sleep in our house, the temperature inside the house was 87.3° F; when we woke that morning, it was 83.7° F. Having the chance to cool off and to consume a meal that didn't consist of non-perishables vaulted us into the car.

Once there, Dorothy told us that Bogey Boudreaux, her neighbor across the street, had saved the day. Bogey was retired from the power company and still owned all the tools from his trade. Hours after Katrina made its way through the area, Bogey, in a highly illegal move, shimmied up the power pole on their street, repaired the blown out transformer, and the whole street had had power ever since. Dorothy reported that because of his actions, she was finally willing to forgive Bogey for shooting a wild turkey in her front yard on Thanksgiving Day in 2002. Dorothy is an animal lover, and at the time of the shooting, she informed Bogey that he'd probably shoot a reindeer in her yard on Christmas, that he'd better not hunt in her yard again, and that she was officially mad at him. Time and natural disasters can heal many wounds.

We reveled in the air conditioning and enjoyed a home cooked lunch of pasta and summer vegetables; our revelation turned to horror when after lunch, Dorothy turned on the TV. I will never forget the images of flooded New Orleans. The full impact of the broken levees really didn't hit us until we saw the pictures; Dorothy was also hosting two people from New Orleans whose houses were among flooded dwellings depicted. That devastation, in addition to my mother not knowing about her house, made for everyone's emotions being all over the place[1].

Once we got our power back on and cleaned up our debris, I began looking outward for ways to assist with the unprecedented efforts going on to serve survivors of the hurricanes. I did several stints of volunteer work, most notably at the Parker Coliseum on the LSU campus, which had been turned into a staging area for pets who had been evacuated as a result of the storm. Evacuees could drop off their pets or could call in to the Center to ask volunteers to travel to their homes, break in, and rescue their pets. Additionally, any rescue worker who picked up pets could drop them off at the Coliseum.

This volunteer experience produced my most haunting Katrina moment, one I will never forget. On the way into the Coliseum, volunteers had to check in and fill out paperwork. My partner Lynn and I were dutifully writing when I noticed the wall behind the people checking us in. On this wall, there hung approximately 150 Polaroid pictures, which formed a huge poster of sorts. Every single Polaroid picture featured a pet, with tags and with a name. On the white space under every single picture were the words, "owner missing." To see the normal scenario of people looking for animals turned upside down was unnerving; to see it on such a grand scale

was unsettling in a way that is difficult to articulate even now. Experiencing the wall of animals without people opened a chamber in my heart that had no defenses. I cried and could not stop, not while I toured the facility and became familiar with the volunteer jobs (walking animals especially, to keep them out of their crates for a time and to give them fresh air and exercise) and the concerns of the Center, especially heat, and especially with elderly animals.

We were led to the back area of the Coliseum, where animals were initially dropped off in droves before being sorted into individual crates; in a row of stalls intended for individual livestock, 10-30 dogs were roaming around per stall. We arrived at the Coliseum for the first time during a single, magical 24-hour window in which, if the staff were absolutely sure that an animal was a stray, they allowed people to adopt the animal.

Lynn and I had already had the conversation on our way to the Coliseum in case adoption was a possibility; our first choice was to foster a dog, preferably a little one and an older one, whom we thought would fit in best with our five cats and dog at home. Alternatively, we could adopt one with the same profile. Lynn and I looked down opposite sides of the row of stalls; I spotted a plump Jack Russell terrier, clearly someone's dog and an outstanding foster candidate, and had just taken a breath to tell Lynn to come and look, when I heard, "Oh honey, LOOK…" in a voice I knew well, the voice of my partner in love. So I went to look; an interestingly patterned, skinny puppy with long legs was trying to hurl its body through an opening half the size of a brick in order to wrap itself around Lynn's hand. Two Coliseum volunteers came up behind us and expertly extracted the dog from the hoard in the stall. The stray dog plastered itself to Lynn's legs, and it was all over: no Jack Russell terrier, no foster situation, no small, older dog that would fit in with our other animals. The volunteers knew a tiny amount about the dog: she had been rescued by boat from St. Tammany parish and was definitely a stray.

"What kind of dog is it?" we asked, and they informed us that it was a Catahoula hound dog (also known as a Catahoula Leopard dog).

"Is that a good dog?" I asked. Both graced me with big smiles - too big smiles, I remember thinking, as they said, "Oh YES, Catahoulas are GREAT DOGS!" I finally managed to stop crying.

We named our new dog Hurricane, in honor of the storm. Dumb, dumb, dumb. There is an adage about how things will live up to their names, and in this case, it certainly proved true. We later tried to change her name to Sugarcane, but it just didn't stick. Hurricane curled up in Lynn's lap and rode quietly home with us after our day at Parker Coliseum. It is the only time she has curled up and been quiet since.

We did a little research on Catahoulas; they are believed to be a cross between dogs brought to Louisiana by explorer Hernando De Soto and dogs kept by Native Americans. They are high energy, working dogs and historically were used for hunting and herding. Though they are not recognized by the American Kennel Club as an official breed, the Catahoula is most definitely recognized here: it is the official state dog of Louisiana.

Hurricane has brought a lot of joy to our household. She keeps the cats on their toes. She chases squirrels, rabbits, possums, snakes, turtles, and any other wildlife that shows up in the backyard; most often, she chases our other dog. Her favorite spot to sit in the backyard is on top of the riding lawn mower, unless it's wintertime, in which case she graces the top of the hot tub cover. Ultimately, Hurricane is a force to be reckoned with; not counting normal expenses associated with keeping a dog (food, vet, medicine, etc.), she has cost us more than any hurricane-related insurance claim we have ever made in terms of items she's chewed through. Listen to this list and hum to the tune of 12 days of Christmas[2]:

A Western suede sweater jacket
2 hot tub power cords
3 hot tub covers
4 seat cushions
5 hose pipes (that's a hose for anyone living outside of LA)
6 hummingbird feeders
7 pairs of shoes
10 pairs of silicon ear plugs
22 pairs of goggles

After getting Hurricane the dog situated in our house (even though it was really the other way around, with the house situating around the dog), we continued to work with other Coliseum staff volunteers, one in particular, who kept "breaking out" elderly dogs and getting them into foster situations so that the dogs wouldn't die of heat exhaustion. One evening, Dorothy came to our house to meet one of these dogs, a 16-year-old Brittany spaniel named Annie. She was frantic and kept running this way and that, searching for her family, or so it seemed. It took about an hour, but Dorothy, who with red hair looked a little like the dog herself, was slowly able to calm the dog down by constantly speaking gently to her, taking control of the leash and walking increasingly slowly, and finally, when the dog collapsed, sitting down next to her and petting her until the dog climbed into her lap and curled up, still panting a little, but calm for the first time since she had arrived at the Coliseum. Dorothy took Annie home to foster until she was reunited with her family approximately eight months later.

It was tiny miracles like these, and acts of kindness, that restored my faith in humanity. In Louisiana, we use the word Lagniappe: it means a little bit extra for free. In the aftermath of the hurricanes, it seemed like everyone gave a little extra for free.

I witnessed so many every day heroes, from Cecile Guin, who broke out almost ten elderly dogs from the Coliseum and got them into successful foster homes, to the people like Dorothy who took them in, to so many of our friends who took in families, to all the people from outside Louisiana who asked us, "What can we send?" Our answer after volunteering at Parker Coliseum was to send fans; we delivered some half dozen to the Coliseum over the period of a couple of weeks.

I volunteered to organize school supplies that had been sent from all over the nation to kids affected by both hurricanes. We opened boxes, sorted materials, and put them in logical order so that teachers and schools could share them with the children in their classrooms who had evacuated from the hurricanes. Our group of ten volunteers had several emotional moments as we unpacked boxes sent from individuals and classrooms all over the United States. I won't forget one box in particular: a Boy Scout troop had filled a number of backpacks with school supplies, coloring books, action figures, and other toys, some new, but some which had obviously been beloved. It was the notes in those back packs that were so poignant, written in crayon, many with illustrations, and with short messages like, "Hang in there, dude," or "We're pulling for you, man."

It is that kind of effort - the rally cry in crayon - the lagniappe effort that doesn't necessarily take all day every day, the one with a single purpose in mind, from the heart, that when taken cumulatively, becomes Herculean. It's not that you set out to change the world, you just set out to impact someone's life, someone that you may not know, but who needs your assistance, and you reach out and do something. And when you take into account everyone's

collective efforts, in essence, it does change the world, and for the better. This is the best part of what I experienced about hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Although I was privileged to see the best of humanity, this state of affairs was not the only one, and in no way takes away from the ever present storms of fear, violence, lack of resources, and profit motive that drove many tragedies in the aftermath, like the Danziger Bridge, the ordeal of Charmaine Neville, the Superdome, and the Convention Center. Or, a little further down the road, big insurance companies, that in the words of Don McLean (1971), “caught the last train for the coast,” in other words, which came first, the wind or the surge, and yes, you’ve been paying your insurance, but no, we’re not going to honor your claim. People who expressed sentiments like, “They (the evacuees) are taking down our neighborhood,” or “New Orleans has been cleansed.” Media reports stating that White survivors of the hurricanes took items that they needed to survive from stores, while Black survivors looted. The Red Cross sticking its collective hands out like a layer of clouds above us, collecting a large percentage of the aid money coming this way, and diverting a percentage of it elsewhere. The Red Cross “ran” a shelter in north Louisiana in name only, with the LSU AgCenter footing all the bills - the Red Cross contributed their name, took 100% of the credit, and left the AgCenter with 100% of the expenses. The toxic trailers supplied to evacuees by FEMA; Chinese drywall; international construction workers who were brought in to rebuild New Orleans and were cheated of their earnings; the amount of federal recovery money steered to states based on the political party affiliation of that state’s governor.

It is difficult to hold all the hope and despair wrought by these hurricanes in your heart at the same time. Or, as novelist Ann Pancake (2007) wrote, “In times like these, you have to grow big enough inside to hold both the loss and the hope.”

Louisianians did what they tend to do: they scrapped and survived. And they laughed. The first shops that re-opened in the French Quarter post-Katrina sold T-shirts that said things like: “FEMA evacuation plan: run motherfucker, run,” or “I survived hurricane Katrina and all I got was this T-shirt, and this Cadillac, and this plasma TV.” For the less irreverent ilk, a favorite motto was, “New Orleans: Proud to Swim Home.”

My most haunting memory from hurricane Rita reminds me of pictures I’ve seen in National Geographic magazine. In early December 2005, Lynn and I drove to Cameron parish to observe the great diversity of birds in the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge. As soon as we drove south on Route 27 from the interstate, we were met by mile after mile of blackened, dead marsh grass. The birds were almost non-existent, and the Wetland Walkway was closed, as it would remain for more than two years. About ten miles down the road, we came around a bend and saw a double wide trailer in an expansive yard; debris from the trailer and from places unknown was strewn across the yard in tornado-style wreckage. In this yard were three people: a man and a woman, who were working together, deliberately placing twisting siding in a pile toward the back end of the property, and a little boy who was maybe six years old.

It is the boy who stands out so clearly in my mind; it was sunny and cold that morning - it might have been 50 degrees, but no higher. The boy had on green rubber boots, a red and blue bathing suit, and nothing else. Mud streaked his bare chest, and sun lit his short blonde hair. He was standing at the front of the property, amidst the rubble, a small bucket in one hand and a shovel in the other. He appeared to be surveying his surroundings, maybe trying to decide where his tiny shovel should next grace the ground.

These are the people of Louisiana. Whether in southeast or southwest Louisiana, people were out there, with heads up and hands down, maybe overwhelmed, but out there, with buckets, shovels, and gloves, toiling together, trying to clean up.

As I look back at the hurricanes some six years later, I know that I am not the same person I was, that many communities are not what they were, and that Louisiana as a state has not recovered in all the ways I hoped that it might. The sad truth is that Louisiana is even more vulnerable to hurricanes like Katrina and Rita now than it was in 2005, and the sadder truth is that we have the knowledge to effectively address this vulnerability, but not the resources. Recovery is a slow, steady process at times, and works in fits and starts at others. All I can say is that Louisiana is on that road, marching to a tune that is part Zydeco, part Catahoula hound dog, and all heart.

* * * *

I was asked to provide y'all with advice as you recover from a significant natural disaster. I struggled with this concept before realizing that I cannot give you advice - it's because I sat in your seat some five and a half years ago, and there was plenty of advice going around, often from the outside and often uninformed - well intentioned, but uninformed. Advice is hard to hear when the advice-givers have swooped in from DC or NY to tell you their "expert" opinions. The message, overtly or covertly, is "We know how to do it, and you don't," or "We're going to tell you how to do it because we have the money, and you don't."

When the advice-givers haven't seen the roiling skies, heard the high winds whistling through unseen air holes in their homes, or heard the freight train sound of a tornado; when their ears haven't popped from pressure drop even as they stand on the ground; when they haven't flinched as a tree walloped a roof or broke a window, or huddled in fear wondering if they would make it, or searched for their neighbors in the aftermath - part of their message falls flat.

I remember listening to outside experts and trying to take the useful things from their messages, but I also felt resentful. When you haven't gone through it, there's a piece of you that very simply doesn't get it.

I get Katrina and Rita. Although I understand parts of what happened in Alabama between April 26 and 29, 2011, I don't understand everything. You can identify with the tornadoes because you experienced them - and you live in this community, the community of Alabama. Those two important, salient points, so often overlooked in the aftermath of hurricanes in Louisiana, give you a critically important perspective. You are the experts by virtue of your experience and your knowledge of place - and because of that, I will not give you advice. It would be absolutely arrogant for me to even try.

All I can do is to share the five things I learned as a result of going through hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and my experiences in subsequent recovery efforts. It's up to you to translate the parts of this message into what will work in your communities, because y'all are the experts.

First, I learned that my experiences with the hurricanes were shaped largely by my previous work with community engagement. Every community has a trench, a place in which people hunker down together to address needs that bolster the common good. Because of my history in working with my community, I knew the shape of that trench and how to connect to it. I knew the strengths and weaknesses of my community and whos to contact to find out the best ways in which to contribute my energy.

Y'all know the shape of the trench of your community, and the fact that you do makes your contributions to recovery especially important. Talmage Stanley, the Director of the Appalachian Center for Community Service at Emory and Henry College in VA, writes extensively about place. I had the honor of hearing him speak, and he said best what I learned about the importance of that trench after the hurricanes: "Yet here these places have taught

me, continue to teach me, and can begin to teach us all a way through. These places teach us about ourselves, teach us about what it means to teach, teach us what is necessary in order to enter into the work of building alliances and coalitions to address these critical issues. From these places, I am learning what it means to be a citizen of a place, to have my mind and my teaching shaped in that place, to see better what it means to link meaningfully service and learning, and why it is so urgent that we do.

The defining characteristic of a citizenship of place is attentiveness to the totality of the place - its natural history and life, its built environment, the complexities and conflicts of its human history and culture. Our places need people who are prepared to see and to understand the world from the perspective of a place, to have a deep attentiveness to all the realities of a place." (Stanley, 2011).

In my opinion, these people are you. This place needs you.

Second, I learned not to wait. I was able to meet with the LSU Foundation shortly after hurricane Katrina; I wanted to ask some of the major playground manufacturers if they had equipment that they were willing to donate to hurricane survivors in Baton Rouge or in New Orleans (through my service-learning contacts there). There was a lot of discussion on timing, and the Foundation thought that we should wait six weeks before asking because they didn't want to look like they had their hand out or that they were trying to take advantage of the situation. When I sent my requests six weeks later, every play company had already sent their donated equipment. I spent a long time chasing that playground equipment, and I never caught up with it. Political strategist Donna Brazile, a Louisiana native who doggedly worked President Bush and congress after the hurricanes to ensure that we had our share of federal resources to recover, says: "We're waiting for someone to tell us that it's okay to go through the door. Don't wait for someone to tell you. Find the envelope. Open it. Walk to the elevator. Push the button. Ride it." (Brazile, 2011).

Third, I learned to work on short-term and long-term goals simultaneously, and the absolute importance of both. After hurricane Katrina, a number of community groups working on children's issues formed the YK coalition. YK stood for Why Katrina (and/or Youth of Katrina, the coalition left the name open for interpretation deliberately) - this group approached me to design a playground inside Renaissance Village.

Renaissance Village was a temporary housing community created immediately after Hurricane Katrina to house survivors of the hurricane; it was located in Baker, Louisiana, about 10 miles North of Baton Rouge, and was home to approximately 1600 people (including 637 children) in the months after the hurricane.

The YK Coalition and other community groups collaborated with FEMA, who was in charge of Renaissance Village, in an effort to positively impact the quality of life for hurricane survivors. Our efforts stalled when it came to the playground because FEMA said that the presence of a playground would encourage people to stay in the temporary community. Renaissance Village consisted of crude blocks of trailers and had no community gathering spaces initially; it was enclosed by tall barbed-wire fence and the only entry and exit point sported armed guards. It was difficult to imagine that even with basic support services, including playgrounds, anyone would elect to stay in the Spartan, temporary community.

The community groups decided to work on short- and long-term goals simultaneously. They addressed the short-term issue by working with Baker mayor Harold Rideau to build a playground for hurricane survivors that was adjacent to (but not inside) Renaissance Village. At the same time, the community groups continued to lobby FEMA to build support services, including playgrounds, inside Renaissance Village. Ultimately, both efforts paid off; the

Renaissance Playground was constructed adjacent to Renaissance Village in April, 2006, and three playgrounds were constructed inside Renaissance Village in September, 2006. Short- and long-term goals, simultaneously.

Fourth, I learned Ken Reardon's edict regarding community engagement: "Generally, we're taught the steps "ready, aim, fire" in terms of accomplishing something. That approach doesn't work in community engagement. If you do proceed through the steps "ready" and "aim" in community engagement, by the time you get to "fire," 90% of the people you started with are dead, and the other 10% are so tired that they don't have the energy left to do anything. In community engaged work, you fire first. Fire and figure out where to aim the stream while it's moving, and forget about ready. If you want to get anything done in community engagement, "fire, aim, ready" is a much better approach."

As I look back at the hurricanes, I'm really glad that the Cajun Navy decided to fire first. I'm glad that Bogey Boudreaux shimmied up the power pole and got his little corner of the community functioning more quickly. When FEMA and community groups were locked in a stalemate over whether or not playground and support services construction would be allowed in Renaissance Village, a famous Louisiana-based company that was providing other services in Renaissance Village decided to hell with the stalemate. They poured a concrete slab and built a basketball court in the middle of the night, and dared FEMA to tear it down. FEMA did not; the basketball court quickly became a cherished community gathering place.

Finally, I learned about the importance of questions. Questions haunted me after hurricane Katrina and still haunt me today. And yet, the act of constructing and answering hard questions, and doing so together, in that trench in which we hunker down to impact the common good, is critically important. It is what we must do to address natural disasters, and to eradicate poverty. It is, in short, our life's work. These are some of my questions:

- One year prior to Hurricane Katrina, I learned about the prediction of 100,000 people dying in New Orleans if the levees broke. I remember thinking to myself, "Wow, that's terrible," and then going back to life as usual. How could I have done that?
- How could the Army Corps of Engineers have known that the levee was breached at the Industrial Canal in May, 2005 and not fixed it?
- My friend Jan Shoemaker, director of LSU's CCELL during hurricane Katrina, remembers thinking, "Boy, I wish that everyone who had been involved in evacuation planning prior to the hurricanes had had a really good service-learning class, because evacuation plans would have been created with community input. Good citizens would have bothered to ask the elderly and other community members with evacuation challenges, "Would you leave without your pet?" and would have made accommodations accordingly."

I've learned to watch out for false dualisms in questions that others construct, and to "call them on it," for example:

- Which is more important, serving our students or our community?
- Which should we choose, creating jobs now or saving our environment later?

Questions that haunt me today run something like this:

- Approximately 25% of all the nation's exports and imports come through our state; we provide 33% of all seafood to this country, and more than a third of oil and natural gas. Every person living in the United States is connected to Louisiana through the bountiful food and energy resources we provide, but providing these resources has cost us land and has taken an environmental toll. The Louisiana Recovery Act of 1990, a $14B research-based, sound plan to fix our coast, re-build land, and shore up levies, has never been even close to fully funded. The property damage from Hurricane Katrina was $81B. The property damage from Hurricane Rita was $11B. This is property damage only, it doesn't take into account the more than 2000 people who lost their lives in these combined storms or the damage to the environment. By not funding the Recovery Act, Congress is saying that it is too expensive, and by extension, that the negative ramifications our state suffers in order to provide resources to the nation, is not the nation's responsibility. How can that be?
- 95-97% of all experts in atmospheric science agree that climate change is real, and that we've got to do something about it. And there are clearly defined, research-based paths for doing so. We know that one effect of climate change is more frequent natural disasters like tornados and hurricanes. How do we stand in the face of all this and do nothing?
- Will the hurricanes of 2005 and the tornadoes of 2011 be remembered or paid attention to if the frequency of natural disasters becomes so prevalent that community devastation is commonplace and therefore unremarkable?
- What will we do?
- What do we need to do?

In summary, those are the five things I learned: The importance of the community trench (the rally cry in crayon); don't wait; work on short- and long-term goals simultaneously; fire, aim, ready; ask and answer questions.

If I look at Louisiana then and now (and in Louisiana we use the terms "before Katrina" and "after Katrina"), some opportunities for improvement were seized. There now exist organized, codified evacuation plans for people with or without animals, and there now exist sophisticated communication networks for disaster preparation. Some universities made a great impact in the state through service-learning and community-university partnerships[3].

Other opportunities have not been seized. The poverty rate in Louisiana is still high and is currently rising; some neighborhoods have never been re-built after the storms. And as stated previously, Louisiana is still as vulnerable to hurricanes as ever.

Research done in Louisiana in the aftermath of the storms by my friend Betsy Garrison and some of her colleagues (Garrison & Sasser, 2009; Knowles et al., 2009) led to the following maxims[4] on community recovery from natural disasters:

- Make people the priority
- One size doesn't fit all (and FEMA trailers fit no one)
- Ensure cultural competence
- Hope rules and humor helps

They also write (Garrison & Sasser, 2009),

"Families are the bedrock of society. In the event of a disaster, resources that keep families strong are often less readily available or diminished, rendering families vulnerable. When families are vulnerable, communities can become vulnerable. Therefore, the commitment to policies, resources, and practices that result in sustainable communities must also include the intentional and programmatic development of stronger, healthier, and resilient families."

I'd like to leave you with a story that happened after the hurricanes. Although it has nothing to do with a natural disaster, the lesson I took from it is my metaphor for community engagement.

I collaborated with Twin Oaks Elementary School on a playground for their school. The original playground had three pieces of equipment, one of which was located far away from the other two pieces. My students and I nicknamed this artifact "the gate to nowhere," because that's what it appeared to be.

We later learned that the gate provided an entry to play equipment that had once been part of the playground, but had been removed due to age. The school principal didn't know why the gate had not been removed when the play equipment was, but she told us that the gate was still used during recess. A teacher had created a game in which the children would line up in front of the gate. The teacher asked each child in line where in the universe they wanted to go, and when the child had thought of a suitable place, the teacher told that child to run through the gate, and for that child to yell where they were going as they ran through it.

I then realized that what my students and I had nicknamed the "gate to nowhere" was actually the kids' "portal to anywhere." I also realized that the Twin Oaks Elementary staff was determined to enhance the hopes, dreams, and imaginations of their students, despite a lack of playground equipment. We upgraded the Twin Oaks playground by adding swings, slides, climbers, a rock wall, and a balance beam. We removed two pieces of old equipment. And we left the gate: the portal to anywhere is still a part of the Twin Oaks playground.

Sometimes, when I look into my community, I see gates to nowhere. I try to remember that with a little ingenuity, a little teamwork, and with a lot of caring, that we can turn gates to nowhere into portals to anywhere.

Notes

[1] My mother's house was amazingly intact; she had lost her back fence, shingles, shutters, and roof façade. Her dwarf magnolia tree was upended in her front yard. We put the fence back up, re-planted the tree (which lived and has now almost doubled in size), found the shutter and re-hung it, and re-shingled the roof. We never found the façade, and she had that replaced professionally. My mother experienced a case of survivor guilt; as she lived some three miles inland (north of the famous railroad tracks), her house didn't take any water. Her house was also a year old and had been built in accordance with the most recent building codes. Across the street from her, houses had come off their foundations; one small business caddy corner to her house was nothing but a frame. Almost everyone who attended her church had lost everything; one of her church friends found her house in a neighbor's pool. My mother's house became the gathering place for the members of her church, many of whom stayed with her on an on-going, rotating basis. For Christmas that year, they made her a blanket that said, "Kay's Bed & Breakfast" to thank her. I think that moving back to Long Beach while it was still essentially a ghost town (especially for the quarter mile inland from the beach, which was razed), serving the people who knew her to the best of her ability, and practicing random acts of kindness, like seeing people waiting outside in unrelenting sun in a Red Cross line, going to the grocery store, buying bottles of water, and then passing them out to people in line, says a lot about my mother's character. The way her house came through Katrina says a lot about the importance of building codes and keeping up with them.

[2]Other assorted items that don't fit the song include the riding lawn mower seat, a wet suit, a queen sized memory foam mattress cover, two full length pool floats, and three kickboards.

[3] See http://www.servicelearning.org/library/resource/8869 and http://tulane.edu/cps/ for further information on service-learning efforts directed at state-wide recovery in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

[4] These are a sample of maxims and recommendations; for the full list developed by these researchers, please consult the references.

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Author

Marybeth Lima is the Cliff & Nancy Spanier Alumni Professor of Biological & Agricultural Engineering and the Director of the Center for Community Engagement, Learning, and Leadership at Louisiana State University.