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Times-Picayune

Katrina inspires New Orleans to find its voice

Sunday, August 29, 2010, 6:02 AM

By Stephanie Grace, The Times-Picayune

Those of you who know me, and probably plenty who don't, know I wasn't born here. I didn't grow up visiting New Orleans. In fact, I had never set foot on Louisiana soil until I flew in for a job interview in 1994.

Residents stand in line at a meeting to express their concerns about housing and other issues post-Katrina.

Although I'd spent my whole prior life along the Boston-Washington corridor, I related to some aspects of my new home immediately: the food, the music, the fondness for political intrigue (which actually wasn't so different from other places I'd lived) and the intense devotion to a hapless sports franchise, familiar to a lifelong Red Sox fan.

But there were other aspects of life here I didn't get at all. One was the widespread tolerance for substandard living conditions and utterly dysfunctional government, the utter absence of the type of activist culture I used to take for granted in a place that really could have used one.

I'm not sure when and why it started, although I've got some theories.

So does a sociologist who has studied the phenomenon. In his essay that's included in the Brookings Institution's "New Orleans Index at Five," Louisiana State University's Frederick Weil described it this way: "By many accounts, New Orleans never developed a robust civil society in its long history prior to Hurricane Katrina. Its elites were closed, its government unresponsive, and most of its citizens swung between passivity and angry protest."

But I know exactly when and why it stopped.

Katrina, and more specifically, the storm's aftermath, flipped a switch, and suddenly residents started taking matters into their own hands, lining up alongside one another and, in many cases, either facing down those old unresponsive elites or reversing the power dynamic and leading the way.

The government failures that motivated them weren't new, but after Katrina they were grievous, and they carried much higher stakes.

In some cases, heavy-handed officials' actions — the threat of neighborhoods being turned to park space or the opening of a landfill near the rebuilding Vietnamese-American community in far eastern New Orleans — spurred ferocious organized reactions. In others, classic inaction left voids into which rushed individuals, non-profits and community organizations old and new.

Everywhere, this nascent activism was fueled by a newly discovered righteous indignation, the sense that people who'd been through so much deserved answers, deserved protection, deserved decent services. Deserved better, just as they always had.

So many people stepped up that I could never name them all. There were brass band players who started music programs for kids, well-off women who formed a red-blazered army of lobbyists in support of reform, block captains who set up communication networks among far-flung neighbors, chefs who mobilized to feed victims of subsequent storms, bands of volunteers who hauled strangers' moldy belongings to the curb and gutted their houses, thousands of individual residents who showed up to public meetings and, judging by Mayor Mitch Landrieu's recent round of community budget meetings, are still showing up five years later. And many, many more.

Along the way, an interesting thing happened. Politicians realized that all that citizen-led progress made them look good, and they jumped on board. They also realized that the

newly empowered community got things done, and they learned to tap into its energy. The results have turned heads all the way to Washington.

On a visit to New Orleans last week, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan offered effusive praise for the network of rebuilding groups, singling out the St. Bernard Project, where he and his family volunteered last year. Donovan has also sought to tap into these groups' success by launching a post-Katrina initiative to send federal rebuilding money to them and to local agencies already working with them. One such agency is the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, which has 10 neighborhood and nonprofit partners. The partners include the St. Bernard Project and nine others, ranging from high-profile celebrity-affiliates to grass roots organizations that have done their work in comparative anonymity.

Weil's research found that post-Katrina "civic engagement" has made a difference in individual lives. Those who feel empowered, he wrote, are more likely to recover from the storm, more likely to feel hopeful and less likely to be depressed or anxious.

And it's made just as big a difference in the city's collective life. After the dreadful events of five years ago, this community could have disappeared. Instead it found its voice and learned to use it.

Somehow, I don't see New Orleans ever shutting up and taking it again.

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