

Documenting Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and One Family's Saga

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Introduction

Tragedy, disaster, catastrophe describe events occurring throughout history. These events often alter lives, bring traumatic challenges, or new opportunities for those impacted. As a nation we have defined these moments as those that have brought out the best in our country, brought us together in spirit and actions, events that have made us *proud to be Americans*. We saw this outpouring of patriotism and shared experiences after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and more recently with the terrorists' attacks of September 11, 2001. Following these tragic American experiences, historians, librarians, educators, social scientists and archivists are called upon to chronicle the lives of survivors, capture and record the stories ensuring that we have not only the official accounts, but the reaction of all those impacted. For example, we owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to the librarians and historians at the Library of Congress for the project *After the Day of Infamy: "Man on the Street Interviews Following the Attack on Pearl Harbor"*. They understood that only through those first reactions, would we receive accurate stories that preserve the memory of that tragic day for future generations, especially when those survivors had long gone. We witnessed similar projects developed to record the stories after the attacks on September 11. The Library of Congress, once again, enlisted librarians, archivists, and historians, in capturing the stories for the project "*Witness and Response: September 11th Acquisitions.*"

The use of oral history to capture the reactions and responses of those that have witnessed these acts, the first responders, and those families who suffered the loss of loved ones, will again allow future generations the opportunity to hear and see these events, not merely through the

filter of the media, but through the voices of those affected. In capturing these stories it is equally important to remember that traumatic events can often make for complicated memories, “The impact of trauma makes the processes of remembering and forgetting more complex than in other situation, and survivors are therefore particularly like to express themselves in stories containing elements which are imaginary, fragmented or disjointed, and loaded with symbolism. This in turn means that the understanding and analysis of these stories is inevitably complicated and challenging.”¹ Today, years after both Pearl Harbor and September 11, these stories continue to evoke a sense of a shared experience even in those individuals who were not personally affected or knew anyone touched by the tragedies.

Hurricane Katrina evokes images of disaster and tragedy too, but many of us cannot say that this was a moment that made us *proud to be Americans*. When the storm hit on August 29, 2005, it was, at that time, what historian Douglas Brinkley called, “...the worst natural disaster in modern American history.”² Rather than one group of people experiencing isolation and suspicion you have an entire American city relegated to second class status. The storm and the aftermath, broadcast over a series of days, very different from previous catastrophic events, the world witnessed live on television the treatment of Americans who were victims of this disaster. However, as with any disaster, one’s response to it depends on the vantage point from which you are viewing the events. For example, after the events of Pearl Harbor, there were the expressions of sadness for those whose lives were lost, however the event became a nightmare for others, specifically Japanese Americans. Their shared sense of sadness at lost lives also reminds them of the irretrievable loss of a sense of belonging due to their experience in internment camps

¹ Rogers, Kim Lacy, Selma Leydesdorff, and Graham Dawson. 2002. *Trauma and Life Stories : International Perspectives*. n.p.: Routledge, 2002. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 18, 2013).

² Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 331.

following the bombings. Similarly, the attacks of September 11th were a shared experience of sadness and senseless loss of life, but for the Arab and Muslim communities it brought with it suspicion and continuous questioning of their patriotism. Moreover their stories, similar to many of those impacted by Hurricane Katrina, especially those in the African American community, will often be greeted with derision, marginalization, and suspicion. The importance of logging these stories of marginalized communities served as the inspiration for the oral history project that is the subject of this chapter.

Yet again, the historians, academics, librarians, archivists, oral history scholars knew that this event had to be captured in all of its problematic and shameful viewpoints, from those left behind and those who were able to escape. Documenting Hurricane Katrina survivors and those that supported them offered opportunities for collaboration and a multi-state project was created in 2005 called “In the Wake of the Hurricanes: A Coalition Effort to Collect Our Stories and Rebuild Our Culture” (<http://www.louisianafolklife.org/katrina.html>). The Coalition, with support from the Louisiana Folklife Program at Louisiana Tech University, spearheaded by Professor Susan Roach, gathered a group of academics, scholars, and community activists to assist those affected by both Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in reconnecting with their communities and culture. The support of The Coalition and the duality of the American experience as viewed through the lens of a multi-generational African American family provide a unique perspective that represents the experience of those voices that are often missing from the historical record. The willingness to reconsider oral histories as a strategic tool in documenting historical events and disasters has brought awareness that we have only scratched the surface in highlighting the experiences of people of color.

This oral history project focusing on the Hankins family and friends impacted by the storm, provides an opportunity to fill in some of the gaps of the shared experience of ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary event. This multi-generational African American family is typical of the families living throughout the metropolitan New Orleans community. They consist of the working class, the working poor, students, homeowners, apartment dwellers, business owners, and first responders. Their stories are told via oral histories and photographs that were taken and conducted a few months after Hurricane Katrina and five years later on the anniversary of the disaster. They will speak about what community meant to them, the government's response to the disaster, their feelings of alienation and disappointment with the political structure, racism, and finally what the future holds for their beloved city and its people.

African Americans and New Orleans Louisiana

New Orleans has been said to be the most European of America's cities, but for the majority of its resident, it was also the most traditional of American cities; with the vestiges of slavery firmly in place. One only needs to reflect that the defining case of the 19th Century for Blacks concerned a New Orleans man of color, Homer Plessy, the litigant in the Plessy v Ferguson case that institutionalized the 'separate but equal' doctrine and legitimized the Jim Crow laws prevalent within the South. The dissenting judge Justice Harlan expressed the prophetic wisdom about the effect of the decision, "For the Plessy majority and for the dissent, for white supporters and white opponents of segregation, white over black was to continue, as a certainty, "for all time." Disenfranchisement and disparity in the allocation of resources and

power, ie separate but equal status has continued to the present. The neglect that the African American population experienced in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina is reflected in impoverished communities, one of the poorest educational systems in the nation, and an over-abundance of low-wage-service jobs, compounding that separate but equal status. The systemic failures in New Orleans, conditions that have created a permanent underclass in New Orleans are widely known and discussed as stated by New Orleans' City Council member Cynthia Willard-Lewis's remarks about the 9th Ward community, a pre-dominantly Black area that was decimated by Katrina, "this is a community with many economic challenges-chronic and systemic poverty in a core group." She further states that "poor education worsens the effects of concentrated poverty and extends its reach into every area of black life."³ These pre-existing conditions within the Black community in New Orleans *exponentially magnified* the trauma of the Katrina survivors because of the Federal and State government's long term neglect of their citizens.

The scholar, Michael Eric Dyson in his discussion of the Middle Passage also suggests a connection between Katrina and slavery, "...this most recent tragedy harkened back even further: the deadly waters of slavery's middle passage flooded the black collective memory. One of the unifying themes of slavery and storms in the black imagination is the traumatic dispersal of black folk across rugged, even resistant, geographies."⁴ The analogy is further enhanced when we consider what caused the displacement of people was the flooding of New Orleans when the levies broke, forcing families to flee, but also separating families members, similar to the experience of slaves. Sadly, the oral stories captured lend a great deal of credence to this narrative of life pre and post Hurricane Katrina. Everyone in the Black community in New Orleans believes that during Hurricane Betsy (1960s) the levies were dynamited to save the

³ Ibid. 78.

⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, "Great Migrations," in *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina*, ed. David Dante Trout, (New York: The New Press, 2006), 75.

French Quarter, flooding Black neighborhoods and killing scores of residents. The oral narratives will show that the notion that Black life is cheap in New Orleans is a common thread.

Hurricane season is a fact of life in Louisiana and throughout the South, beginning in June and lasting until November. Professor William Gray, currently one of the most influential storm trackers and head of the Tropical Meteorology Project at Colorado State University, projected that during the 2005 hurricane season “there would be twenty named storms, twice the average. That estimate, which seemed so extravagant before the season began, was ultimately short: there were thirty named storms in 2005. Furthermore, Gray predicted that six major hurricanes would develop in the Atlantic, three times the average (there were indeed six) and said that there was a 77 percent chance that one would strike the United States.”⁵

The Hankins children with friends had traveled twice to College Station, Texas to avoid potential storms during the 2005 hurricane season only to have them pass the city without harm. Staying abreast of Katrina’s movements, there was a general feeling among many of them that this was unlike anything they had experienced in over 20 years of living in New Orleans. In 1998, they had escaped severe damage from Hurricane Georges by driving to Baton Rouge, normally a two hour trip that took over ten hours. The weekend of August 26-28, the storm warning of an upgrade to a category five hurricane coupled with the Mayor’s late mandatory evacuation order, forced everyone to rethink the strategy of *waiting out the storm*. Media conveyed the news of the possible devastating impact of this storm to the New Orleans community; the Hankins family, once again, began to arrive in College Station. By Monday morning, August 29, there were 15 family and friends from Louisiana in a small three-bedroom duplex. When Katrina made landfall and reports of the levee breaches occurred, everyone remained glued to television sets. Stunned at the drama as it unfolded, they wondered about friends and colleagues stranded in the cities. Everyone

⁵ Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*, 75.

watched in horror as water engulfed the cities of Chalmette and New Orleans. Chalmette, where many of the Hankins family members lived, with all the toxic chemicals and oil refineries housed there, was totally underwater. Following weeks of the emotional aftermath of Katrina, the realization that life in College Station would be the fate of the now 19 evacuated Hankins family members and friends appeared evident.

The stories can appear imaginary, fragmented or disjointed, typical of those subjected to traumatic experiences. The stories also speak of recovery and resiliency as the subjects struggle to literally remake and move forward with their lives. Understanding and acknowledging the symptoms related to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV 2000) provides a framework for recovery. Symptoms of Katrina victims connected with post-traumatic stress are recognizable in the three DSM symptom clusters listed below:

1. Re-experiencing symptoms-intense psychological distress, physiological reactivity, and exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble aspects of traumatic event (fear of heavy rain, lack permanence, loss of feelings of security);
2. Avoidant Symptoms-marked diminished interest or participation in significant activities; feelings of detachment or estrangement from others; restricted range of affect (unable to experience loving feelings); sense of foreshortened future (not expecting to have a career, a marriage, a childhood, or normal lifespan);

3. Hyper-arousal Symptoms-difficulty falling or staying asleep; irritability or outbursts of anger; exaggerated startle response; difficulty concentrating; or hyper vigilance.⁶

The narratives will discuss many of the symptoms the participants displayed throughout their ordeal of escaping the Hurricane and the aftermath attempting to recover their lives. The most prevalent symptom displayed initially was the *Avoidant Symptom*, the deliberate need to disconnect to what was happening in New Orleans and lack of interest and sense of detachment from what was going on. As the realization of the extent of the devastation became known *Hyper-arousal Symptoms* set in for many of the victims with many of them hyper vigilant about storms, often seeing them as precursors to flooding and loss of life. The emergency planning that many residents had in place failed them, prompting rethinking any permanent or long term decisions because of the uncertainty of life in New Orleans. *Re-experiencing Symptoms* has been the more permanent and frequent symptoms displayed by the participants with the effects lasting until the present. Careers have been put on hold, relationships broken, drug addiction, and estrangement have affected some of the participants. Coming to grips with the loss of everything and continually discovering these losses reinforces this lack of permanence. The Katrina disaster and the lack of appropriate and timely response subjected Katrina victims to serious threat of harm to life, physical integrity, their children, spouses and close relatives. The sudden destruction of homes and communities, the pain of seeing or hearing of loved ones, neighbors, and friends that had been killed or injured, and fear, terror, and helplessness heightens the anxiety. Ultimately, the Katrina disaster led families to experience long term dispersal away

⁶ University of Missouri-Columbia International Center for Psychosocial Trauma. *Promoting Hope for the Survivors of Katrina: Training Course in Trauma Psychology & Psychiatry to help Traumatized Children and their Families*. Workshop presented at Tulane University, New Orleans Louisiana, November 11-12, 2006, 15-16.

from their homes, the family base, and the community to which they were devoted. For these Katrina survivors it has been an ongoing struggle, with many of them successfully facing the challenges, but some ultimately succumbing to the stress and trauma.

The Hankins Family Narratives

As with any natural disaster, the theoretical can only explain so much of a tragedy, but it takes the human element to place something in context; it is only via the stories of those who experience a trauma do we know the true effect of events as devastating as Hurricane Katrina. The ideal research is not to rely solely on the written word as the only means of documentation, but in those instances where available, oral histories coupled with the written word serve as powerful tools in verifying the accuracy of an event. The example of the Hankins family and their stories seek to put a human face on the disaster that others can hopefully connect to and learn from.

22 year old Rachel Washington Hankins, married to Salih Hankins, was born and raised in Louisiana. Rachel, Salih, and brother Muhammad Shajad Hankins lived in Chalmette, LA approximately 20 minutes from New Orleans. “I like the cultural aspect of the region... if you walk down the streets people say “hi” whether they know you or not; people were very familiar. It was very peaceful and quiet...all of my family mostly stayed in New Orleans and the surrounding areas and we would get together quite often, especially on weekends, go bowling, go out to eat, spend time together.”⁷ Rachel was an undergraduate social work student at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) an HBCU. Rachel’s family had lived in the Chalmette/New Orleans area for over three generations; a working class family, she was one of the first to attend college. For Rachel the stories of Hurricane Betsy influenced her thinking about Hurricane Katrina, “My mom and my dad told me that when Betsy came they actually

⁷ Rachel Washington Hankins (RWH) interview, December 14, 2005.

blew the levies in the 9th Ward and St. Bernard Parish to protect the uptown and downtown areas...I was thinking they may do the same thing to us again...”⁸ She stayed behind to help her mother and ten other family members leave New Orleans. They drove to Texas and were helped by a church in Jasper, Texas before she was reunited with her husband in College Station Texas. They lost everything to Katrina including their home, two cars and most of their household goods. Her family was dispersed to Tennessee, Texas, Florida, and Colorado.

Rachel talks about her initial response after evacuating from New Orleans that she did not pay much attention to the coverage of the storm, she felt very detached from what was going on. She talks about not listening to the news until days after the evacuation, a manifestation of PTSD’s Avoidant Symptoms. “The first week I was kind of detached, it was impersonal to me, it’s not that bad.” After the first week she started to hear the news about the destruction and the people that were in desperate circumstances, she became more concerned and attentive to the news. She also talks about not returning to New Orleans because of the devastation and losing everything, but she and her husband did return, moving back to a hotel in downtown New Orleans to finish her education. Salih talks about the difficulty of finding a community when they returned “the neighborhoods are different, they are not people you know, no longer family oriented the way it used to be, not that community type feel..”⁹ They eventually found a home in their old neighborhood in Chalmette where Rachel’s mom and sister moved too. Rachel finished a Master’s degree in Social Work and she and Salin now live in Webster Texas.

The Hankins immediate family is not native to New Orleans, having migrated from Michigan to Louisiana to find a better life. In the tradition of many of their Black ancestors who had traveled from the deep south to Northern states to escape racism and oppression, the Hankins

⁸ RWH interview.

⁹ Salih Hankins (SH) interview, October 7, 2006.

family's migration back to the South in 1984 was consistent with the shift in populations that was occurring all over the south. "Following a net loss of almost 300,000 Blacks in the second half of the 1960s, the South had a small net gain in 1970-75, which increased to over 100,000 in 1975-80 and almost 200,000 in 1985-80 and almost 200,000 in 1985-90...during 1990-95, the South had an unprecedented net in movement of over 300,000 Blacks into the region (Frey, 1998)."¹⁰ The choice of New Orleans with tales of voodoo and Marie Leveau, Congo Square, the birthplace of jazz, a celebrated cultural and artistic community, and a 'New South' that promised a new start was hard to resist. Unfortunately for the Hankins family and the residents of New Orleans, the 1985 failures of the oil and gas industry in concert with the failed policies of the city government forced the New Orleans economy into a state of Depression. The majority of the African American population switched to survival mode as the city rapidly transformed from the lucrative oil field work to a minimum-wage service industry dependent on tourism. The patriarch of the family, Dwight Handara Hankins notes the shift in the population, "Generally speaking New Orleans for Black people, at least, was not a good place to earn a living. ...there was not a go getter type of mentality in New Orleans' community and culture, it is more like just trying to get by...everybody recognizes the strength of the culture of New Orleans, but truthfully it was only appreciated from a distance. You know, the people who maintain the culture who are the culture are the ones who are suffering the most economically and being deprived the most politically"¹¹ What the people of New Orleans would soon discover was that the city had neither the infrastructure nor the will to take care of its citizens; a fact that would play out on the world stage with Hurricane Katrina.

¹⁰ Glenn V. Fuguitt, et al. "The Shifting Patterns of Black Migration into and from the Nonmetropolitan South, 1965-95." *US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service Report*. (2001), 1.

¹¹ Dwight "Handara" Hankins (DHH), transcribed interview October 7, 2006, pages 2-3.

For those who have never experienced being evacuated, it is difficult to explain. One day your entire life is changed, wrecked, displaced. Many left New Orleans with only the clothing on their backs and were happy to have a modest mode of transportation away from certain death. It can take hours to get out of a city like New Orleans that is surrounded by water and has very few exit points. You either go towards I-10 East or I-10 West, depending on whether you are heading towards Texas or Mississippi, this is your route. Creating an orderly flow is strategic for a smooth and orderly evacuation, so the government's implementation of a timely contra flow on the highways is crucial. The patriarch of the Hankins family Dwight Handara Hankins talks about the problems he faced leaving New Orleans, "They really should have started the contra flow across the bridge on the west bank or at least downtown so that majority of the people could get on the contra flow downtown and head on out the city. So consequently it took us two hours just to get from the cemetery on I-10, the Pontchartrain Express Way to where the contra flow started which was around the Causeway somewhere around there... normally a five minute drive, it took us almost two hours because we were in that traffic jam people's cars were breaking down, ... because it was an emergency situation people were just trying to get out. People were walking, people were on bikes, you know, people were driving vehicles that they would not normally drive because it was a life and death situation as far as people know, so we finally got to the contra flow and we headed on out."¹² Before Katrina Hankins was a self-employed electrician and worked with many of the large events that came to New Orleans. While in New Orleans he recognized the trauma that many of the residents were experiencing and sought the help of a group of educators and psychologists from the University of Missouri-Columbia's International Center for Psychosocial Trauma, eventually assisting them in hosting two workshops on mental health and trauma for area schoolteachers and activists. The

¹² DHH, pages 3-4

medical and mental health system in New Orleans has always been underfunded, but after Katrina the system has been chronically in a crisis mode. As Dr. Bruce D. Perry notes in his article *The Real Crisis of Katrina*, “Even before Katrina we were drowning our front-line child care providers, our educators, our child welfare workers and our mental health providers... To these overwhelmed services we will be adding hundreds of thousands of children.”¹³

Nevertheless, the Governor of Louisiana continues to cut resources for mental health facilities and services. Mental health is not the only problem faced by returning residents, with crime, education, and housing adding to their obstacles.

Housing costs have increased exponentially since Katrina, pricing many former residents out of their old neighborhoods. The Oxfam Report, *Mirror on America*, notes that “82,000 apartments were damaged or destroyed by Katrina and Rita, but the highest official estimate proposes to replace only about 25,000 affordable units... Full recovery is possible only when affordable homes are coupled with secure, decent jobs.”¹⁴ Handara lived in uptown New Orleans until the lack of a stable income forced him to return to College Station. He now he resides in Houston working as an electrician while also remaining active in the Islamic community.

Bagel Hankins, 22 speaks about her similar ordeal leaving with her two children and fiancé Lee Williams, “The night before (Saturday) filled up on gas... we left New Orleans at about 10:30 (am Sunday) and made it to Shreveport at 4 o’clock in the morning. Shreveport is only a five hour drive; five hours because we had to go out of Louisiana into Mississippi drove a little up into Mississippi and then went back into Louisiana. That’s how we had to do it because

¹³ Bruce D. Perry, M.D, Ph.D., “The Real Crisis of Katrina,” *The Zero*, http://www.vachss.com/guest_dispatches/Katrina-tragedy.html

¹⁴ Oxfam. “Mirror on America: How the state of Gulf Coast recovery reflects on us all.” Page 4. <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/publications/mirror-on-america>

the traffic was so bad and I was so tired. We were in Hattiesburg, MS and I was so tired from driving and I said we should just stop and Lee said no we can't stop because this is where the hurricane is going to hit. And I wanted to stop because I was just so tired, but he said no come on we have to keep going. Good thing we did, because we would have been right there in Hattiesburg right where the eye of the storm hit. I'm glad I just got the strength to just drive."¹⁵

Sajidah and Lee were part of the working poor but upwardly mobile, looking to purchase a home. Lee was a manager at one of the restaurants in New Orleans. They initially left before Katrina, traveled to Shreveport to be near Lee's family and then came to College Station to be near the other Hankins family members. Less than 6 months after their evacuation Lee was called back to manage a restaurant on the Westbank of New Orleans so they had to leave College Station. Their lives have been up and down, estrangement and reconciliation, it has been a struggle to maintain a healthy and supportive relationship, but they are making it work. They are both working, struggling to get their lives back on track. Sajidah is now a student at Delgado Community College and working towards a degree in criminal law.

Fatimah Hankins, her husband Lawrence Sylvan, three children, along with 2 foster sons, were forced to leave their close-knit community in Marrero, LA. The Sylvan family, natives of New Orleans, included Lawrence's mother, sisters and brother, all living in the same neighborhood. They were working class family and childhood friends of the Hankins children. Two days before Katrina hit New Orleans they packed up and drove to College Station Texas to be with family. Lawrence's mother and one sister moved to Dallas and another sister and her family moved to Georgia. Again the separation and dispersal of families increased stress and trauma on this once tight-knit family. Fatimah speaks about her children and the struggle to adapt to new surroundings, "...my oldest son Khalil he wanted to go see his cousins and I tried to explain to him

¹⁵ Sajidah Bagel Hankins (SBH) interview, October 7, 2006.

that we were staying in another state now and that he couldn't just pick up and go right around the corner and see them. He didn't understand why, but as time went on he got better. And my two youngest they really didn't care, and my two foster children Ernest and Alvin it affected them a lot more. Because not only were they with me, but they were away from their families in another state in another school."¹⁶ After almost a year in Texas, Lawrence and Fatimah also left Texas and returned to Louisiana. They decided against moving back to New Orleans due to the uncertainty of life there, but they moved to Opelousas, about two hours from New Orleans, but the isolation was too difficult. They moved back to the Westbank of New Orleans in Marrero and bought a house that they struggle to maintain the mortgage. Fatimah has enrolled in school and is a sophomore at Delgado Community College majoring in engineering.

Though some of those who had arrived to College Station had high hopes of making a new life, their dreams were daunted by unforgiving and biased treatment from some of the citizens of that town. Vincent Holmes, childhood friend of the Hankins, also came to College Station, talks about his experience in this new city, "...locally, in the beginning everybody was pretty nice, but towards the...like now (2006) they are not so nice anymore...I live in a complex and I have a landlord and every time he sees me he constantly remarks on Hurricane Katrina, how lazy the people are from New Orleans, they don't want to find jobs..."¹⁷ Vincent was a small business owner in New Orleans, an Air Force vet, so these remarks were particularly problematic, but as time wore on you heard these comments from many throughout the country including politicians. Texas politician Kinky Friedman spoke for many when he called Katrina survivors "crackheads and thugs"¹⁸ To be a Katrina survivor became a pejorative

¹⁶ Fatimah Hankins Sylvan, December 20, 2005.

¹⁷ Vincent Holmes, October 12, 2006.

¹⁸ Dailykos.com article, September 12, 2006. <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2006/09/12/245710/-Kinky-calls-Katrina-Evacuees-crackheads-and-thugs>

designation that marked you as an ingrate, lazy, and a tax burden. In spite of the negatives, Vincent stayed in College Station and opened two businesses. Five years later he has moved to Clear Lake TX where he has his own karate school and with his girlfriend recently welcomed a son to their household.

Menelik Mitchell, 31 years of age, son of the matriarch in the Hankins family, was in the Air Force National Guard Reserves living at the base in Belle Chase, LA until they were evacuated due to flooding. He returned to New Orleans from the army base in Lafayette on Tuesday, the day after Katrina hit, to assist with supplying food and water to the stranded people in the Superdome and Convention Center. He talks about the work they did to alleviate the suffering, "... it was kind of crazy to see all the food, like you would go out there for four hours and you might fill maybe twenty helicopters up with food and water ... go back to the hanger where you staying and you watch TV and you seeing all these people that are starving and the people on the west bank that they are starving and need water ... and we just see pallets and pallets and pallets of water and tractor trailers filled with water, ... and we were just begging to drive out there to give water to them, but they wouldn't let us... because "we" weren't given weapons."¹⁹ He later accompanied the Kenyon Corporation during body retrieval and recovery. "...you might not see nothing except everything is destroyed then you look over the couch, everything is mud and black but you keep looking and there might be a body there. We found bodies up in the backyard under trees, or just lying in the yard."²⁰ Menelik talks about the spike in suicides of friends in the military since Katrina. He initially had trouble sleeping, adjusting to civilian life with feelings of alienation and hopelessness to overcome. He decided to finish up his education, completing a degree in Sociology at SUNO, and now seeking a teaching job in

¹⁹ Menelik Mitchell (MM), October 7, 2006.

²⁰ MM, interview transcript, page 4.

Houston. He is typical of many of the Katrina survivors, trying to move on with their lives, get an education, and then leave the city.

Shajad was a straight A student at Nunez Community College in Chalmette and wanted to be a doctor. The disruption to his life has been monumental. In Chalmette he and his brother were anchors for each other, sharing expenses, working with Jose, and engaged in academic competition. His school was in walking distance and he had a plan for how he would achieve his dream of going to medical school. Due to his Katrina displacement, he lost everything and his life was derailed. He also displayed PTSD symptoms from his ordeal with Katrina, “I think it has numbed me because you don’t want to imagine that people you know is getting messed up like that. You don’t want to imagine that “your boy” is on a roof or something like that because it was crazy.”²¹ After six months of floundering in an attempt to find a job and unsuccessfully trying to re-enter school in College Station, Shajad returned to Louisiana, where he lived with his brother and sister-in-law and enrolled in Nunez to finish up his associate degree. In 2010 he moved back to College Station and now lives with his mother, works, and struggles to get his life back on track.

Of the more than 19 family and friends of the Hankins family that evacuated, only Fatimah and Bagel with their families continue to live in the New Orleans area. Their tight knit group of family and friends are all either in Texas or Georgia. Erica Hackett, another childhood friend, and her son Tyree lived in Algiers, Louisiana across the street from Sajidah. Erica initially went to Mississippi with her mother and stepfather, but she eventually moved to College Station to be near her close friends in the Hankins family. Her attempts to find normalcy continued to elude her and she returned to Algiers in December 2005. Erica was working in a low-skilled job in New Orleans, but became involved with the drug culture. She and Sajidah had moved into a house in

²¹ Muhammad Shajad Hankins interview, October 12, 2006.

New Orleans, but their relationship was frayed and they barely spoke finally moving separately. Erica has spent three stints in the New Orleans prisons for drug use, and will be paroled in the Fall.

Conclusion and Future Research

When we couple personal loss with the destruction of New Orleans, it is not only a tragedy that was avoidable, but also a crime that has many villains. From the neglect of the levy systems to the abandonment of rescue efforts, the local, state, and federal governments all have a share in this disaster and its aftermath. As the saga of Katrina continues to unfold and those affected by it fade from the headlines, we who continue to see the victims and the pathologies that evolve from this ordeal ask ourselves a number of questions: What can we do to help recover lives lost? What tangible actions can we champion to prevent this from occurring in the future? How do we minimize the mental and physical trauma of these events? And finally, how do we hold our governments accountable? As parents and friends, we lament the slowness of recovery and the bureaucracy that dehumanizes our families. We also see the long term impacts of the storm and some of the triumphs of the people affected. Five years after the storm what have we learned, what are the positives we can reflect on, what are the overall consequences that can help us with future catastrophic events, and what can we continue to do to help the people and the city make a full recovery? On the other hand, as academics and social chroniclers, we know the importance of capturing those early reactions, the oral stories that define events. We know also are aware of the importance of follow-up and long term documentation of events, when often the effects don't appear for years and often decades later.

Of the nineteen Hankins family and friends that came to College Station, twelve have been interviewed. In 2011 additional interviews were conducted with four friends that stayed during the storm and two additional First Responders. The authors will continue interviewing

the individuals affected by Katrina, expanding the interviews to cover others outside of the Hankins family as comparison data, simultaneously keeping track of the long term recovery of the family and the greater New Orleans. This family is in many ways a microcosm of the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans in particular. This study offers some sociological and psychological analysis and comparative data for what occurs after a devastating trauma impacts a related group of people, how they attempt to reconnect and revitalize their lives after a tragedy. These stories are real accounts of how one family, the Hankins, like many other families dispersed by the Katrina disaster, have experienced many of the symptoms connected with post traumatic stress. Muhammad Shajad exhibited marked diminished interest or participation in significant activities like education; Fatimah cannot explain the increase in irritability or outbursts of anger that has led to her arrest on charges of spousal abuse; or Salih's hyper vigilance when it rains are some of the characteristics that have been observed in the Hankins close knit family. Ultimately, the stories speak of lost communities and ongoing challenges to rebuild lives. The stories are told with humor, sadness, dignity, indignation, and love. As family members and members of the academic community, we continue to document the ongoing saga of the Hankins family because we know that Katrina will never be over for them. It remains a defining moment in many of their lives and its aftermath will continue to have an impact on their lives.

As the authors document these disasters through oral history compilations and from the academic perspective there are questions we must ask ourselves: When is close (relations) too close? When is soon too soon to look back? What are the next steps? How do we objectively document these stories? Are we asking the right questions? How do we avoid re-traumatizing? What are the lessons learned? How do we help these families heal? There are now thousands of

oral history sites to download or listen to reactions to America's tragedies and triumphs, from large national projects to smaller community ones. These stories will capture the history of floods, fires, family stories, academic and corporate histories, revolutions, evolutions, or just document change. Whatever their purpose, we will value the stories being told as we listen to real people chronicle real lives. For the African Americans trying to tell their stories of the aftermath of Katrina, those healing from the double layer of trauma, or the *double consciousness* that W.E.B. DuBois notes, being Black and American; it will take a significant amount of time to recover. The pain of acknowledging this reality for African Americans comes through succinctly in the words of Lawrence Sylvan, husband of Fatimah Hankins, as he sums up how many in the New Orleans community view the "American dream" in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina: I feel like the people that we have in power to make change have done a mediocre job at best. I think that people are happy knowing that there are people doing bad because of Katrina. I think our Federal government has proven what everybody already suspected that we can't trust them. ...and as great of a country as they say America is, the land of the free, this great country has only been the land of the free to one race and every other race and every other ethnic background it's been the land of trial and pain and I think that Katrina was a reflection of that trial and pain.²²

²² Lawrence Sylvan, interview October 6, 2006

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