

# Faith and Hope in New Orleans

Dominicans After Hurricane Katrina



Stories of recovery  
about the Dominican Family  
August, 2007

**A** picture is worth a thousand words – or so they say – but even pictures cannot capture the full impact of the devastation caused when Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans Aug. 29, 2005. That was the feeling among many of the Dominican communicators who visited New Orleans during the January, 2007 OPCOMNET Conference. Seeing the devastation first hand, realizing how much worse it must have been a year and a half prior, and hearing personal accounts of life before, during and after Katrina brought to light the fact that the story isn't over even though it may have disappeared from the news.

Something terrible happened to the people of New Orleans, among them members of the Dominican family. **Hope and Faith in New Orleans** attempts to shed some light on the untold story of New Orleans, how Hurricane Katrina affected the Dominicans in the city, their battle to rebuild and how they are coping two years later.

During January's conference the communicators compiled a series of stories documenting the Dominicans from New Orleans as they attempt to rebuild their lives post-Katrina. The stories are moving, but each contains a message of hope and resilience.

# Faith and Hope In New Orleans

## **A Beacon of Hope Lights the Road to Recovery in New Orleans**

The Beacon of Hope Resource Center was chartered to “assist all New Orleans homeowners in rebuilding and restoring their homes and communities.” Read the complete story beginning on **page 4** to find out exactly how The Beacon of Hope Resource Center is working to bring people and communities back to city one community at a time.

## **Different Lives Living in the Same World**

About 25 of the 40 members of the St. Dominic Chapter of the Dominican Laity returned to New Orleans to rebuild after Katrina and whether in baby steps or in great leaps, they have helped one another in the long recovery effort – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Read **page 6** to find out more to find out how this close-knit group has grown even closer.

## **Telling the Story**

The experience of Katrina didn’t change Sr. Noel’s ministry at the Spirituality Center at the Notre Dame Seminary as much as it added a new dimension as people seek someone to talk to not just about spiritual direction, but about their own experiences during the Katrina ordeal. Read the rest of the story starting on **page 10** to find out how the Spirituality Center is helping others deal with Katrina and helping tell the story of Aug. 29, 2005.

## **St. Mary’s Dominican High School: A Wave of Success**

Through “prayer, people, program, policy, property and preaching,” less than five months after more than 80 percent of the city was left underwater by the storm, the St. Mary’s Dominican High School reopened. Read the complete story beginning on **page 4** to see how dedication and determination helped reopen the school to 87 percent of its pre-Katrina enrollment.

## **Being Eucharist in a Hungry City**

Srs. Diana Hooley and Alberta Schindler work for Serenity Hospice Center. Through reflection on the faith of the people she encounters, Sr. Diane recognizes that many good gifts come in the form of prayer, emotional and physical support and volunteers who help in difficult times – read the complete story on **page 14** to find out how.

## **The Dominican Family Responds**

Dominicans were among those touched by the images of New Orleans shown on television and in newspapers. Read **page 16** to find out how other Dominican congregations offered assistance to our Dominican family and the city of New Orleans.

## **Home is Where Your Heart is**

Over half of the Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic associates were impacted by Hurricane Katrina. After being gone for several weeks, or longer, some were able to return to the city and repair their homes — others weren’t that lucky. Read the complete story on **page 16** to learn how the EMDs are finding that “Home is where your heart is.”

## **C’est Si Bon: Dominican Friars Fully Engaged in Post-Katrina Recovery**

The friars of the Southern Province see post-Katrina rebuilding as an opportunity to preach the Word of faith in God, even in the midst of a massive and slow recovery from one of the country’s worst natural disasters. Read more about how the friars are dealing with the rebuilding efforts in their area on **page 18**.

## **Adrian Dominican Sisters Assist Friars**

The Adrian Dominican Sisters have been a visible and lively presence in the New Orleans area. Not only have the sisters been providing a service to New Orleans, they have found their time there to be a blessing to them as well. Read the story on **page 20** to find out what the Adrian Dominican Sisters have been doing and how they have been assisting in New Orleans.

## **Water Memories**

Sr. Patricia Rogers was the principal at St. Mary Academy. The school was never rebuilt. Experience a first hand account of how Sr. Patricia is coping with the devastation and loss during Hurricane Katrina by reading the complete story on **page 21**.

# The Day That Changed New Orleans

There are certain days that we can all look back on and remember where we were if it happened in our lifetime. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, when JFK was shot, when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded or when the World Trade Center Towers fell are all instances that come to mind. But do you remember where you were when Hurricane Katrina made landfall?

New Orleanians know where they were that day – a day that life as they knew it stopped and started again differently. Many of them were not even in the city at all. Forced out by the eminent storm and mandatory evacuations, residents fled to other cities while some were forced to area shelters like the Superdome. Some decided to “ride out” the storm in their homes. What happened the morning of Aug. 29, 2005, will never be forgotten, especially by those whose lives it changed forever. Their ongoing struggle to rebuild their lives and the city they call home, even two years later, is still a story that needs to be told.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

On Aug. 23, 2005, the National Hurricane Center announced the formation of Tropical Depression 12. The next day it has strengthened into Tropical Storm Katrina. Less than 24 hours later it was upgraded to a hurricane and made landfall in Florida at 7 p.m. It was upgraded again to a Category 2 hurricane the next morning with forecasts that it would soon be upgraded to a Category 3 storm. At 11 p.m. on Aug. 27, the National Hurricane Center issued a warning that Hurricane Katrina was headed for New Orleans. Two hours later it was declared a Category 4 storm before being upgraded just seven hours after that to a Category 5 storm, the highest rating. Mandatory evacuation of New Orleans was ordered by Mayor Ray Nagin.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, at 6:10 a.m. as a Category 4 hurricane, but it wasn't the hurricane itself that caused the majority of the damage in New Orleans. The Mississippi River



**On Aug. 29, 2005, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet breached its levees in 20 places as a result of Hurricane Katrina leaving 80 percent of the city underwater.**

Gulf Outlet breached its levees in 20 places. Other major levee breaches included three major breaches in the Industrial Canal levee, one in the 17<sup>th</sup> St. levee and two in the London Ave. levee. It was these breaches and rising water in the canals that caused 80 percent of the city to end up underwater just hours after Katrina swept through.

## AFTER THE STORM

The nightmare was just getting started for the city of New Orleans after the eye of the storm passed through. While 80 percent of the city had evacuated, there were residents who remained. Thousands were housed in the sweltering heat of the damaged Superdome, what was termed the “refuge of last resort,” and there were still survivors scattered on roof tops and in attics of homes in flooded areas waiting to be rescued. There was no electricity and no clean water to drink. Temporary morgues were set up throughout the area. The entire Southeast Louisiana region was declared a disaster area by the federal government.

Neighborhoods were gone and

people were scattered – they still are! The latest census data estimates that approximately one half of the city's population has moved back, but many of those are living in FEMA trailers while work is still being done on their homes.

Some of the hardest hit areas were: the Lower Ninth Ward, Lakeview and St. Bernard Parish.

The Lower Ninth Ward is a low lying area located in the easternmost, downriver portion of the city. While the Upper Ninth Ward flooded it did not suffer the same amount of damage as the Lower Ninth. It is reported that this area comprises the vast majority of hurricane damaged territory still without noticeable improvement and rebuilding. What was once a populated portion of the New Orleans metropolitan area is now acre after acre of empty lots. Few buildings remain. The area gained notoriety shortly after the storms when several national media outlets broadcast from there. It has since become something of a tourist spot where visitors get a true sense of

*Continued on Page 9*



# A Beacon of Hope Lights the Road to Recovery

Like a mythological phoenix rising from the ashes of desperation and despair, the city of New Orleans is slowly and painfully starting to heal in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Seventeen months after the failure of the levees and pumping stations caused the devastation of eighty to eighty-five percent of the entire city, there are still hundreds of square miles of gutted houses and abandoned neighborhoods. Even though there is a trickle of residents who are starting to return, it is estimated that there are roughly 175,000 former inhabitants who have not yet come back. Many evacuated homeowners who still have jobs in the city commute long distances on a daily basis. "They might think about moving back, but when they look at the conditions of their old neighborhoods, they realize that they really do not even know where to begin," said homeowner John Pippinger. Many property owners have simply given up and relocated elsewhere to begin new lives.

Established in the months immediately following the devastating storm, The Beacon of Hope Resource Center raises the hopes and quality of life for these desperate families by providing information and resources to help them rebuild. Founded by Lakewood South homeowners Denise and Doug Thornton, flood survivors themselves, Beacon of Hope was chartered to "assist all New Orleans homeowners in rebuilding and restoring their homes and communities." Today, Beacon of Hope has branched out from the Thorntons' flood-damaged home to eight satellite locations concentrated within the Lakeview district of New Orleans.

As a non-profit organization entirely dependent on volunteers and donations, Beacon of Hope takes a grassroots approach to rebuilding the city. By improving general neighborhood conditions first, property owners will be encouraged to consider returning and working on their individual properties. The first group of Beacon volunteers to enter an abandoned neighborhood is there to pick up debris, mow lawns, remove dead trees, and



**New construction fostered through the efforts of The Beacons of Hope program springs up amidst the lingering devastation.**

improve the general appearance of the area. "It mentally impacts people when they look at their yards and see the tires, storm debris and garbage all cleaned up, and they kind of step back and think to themselves, well maybe, just maybe, I can come back," said Lori Bird, Co-Administrator of the St. Paul Beacon, during a recent orientation session for high school volunteers. Bird added, "By cleaning up the neighborhood, we are also sending a message to criminals [looters] that — hey, something is going on here, people live here."

The Beacon volunteers also perform "block surveys" which are assessments of the conditions of individual houses, neighborhood infrastructure (sidewalks, streets, manholes, trees and landscaping, fire hydrants, abandoned vehicles, etc.), street lighting, and the city water and sewer system. The surveys are then passed along to property owners and city officials to give them a starting reference for what needs to be repaired or replaced.

According to Beacon Satellite Administrator Linda Pippinger, the obstacles facing the returning residents are many. "Toxic flood debris everywhere, no utilities, wind and water

damage to building structures, mildew and mold growth and a lack of basic services like mail delivery and telephone," she said. Peppinger and her husband John, their children and their families were all living within a four-square mile area of the Lakeview district when Katrina hit. Each family member's home was seriously damaged or destroyed, and Linda and John were forced to cash in their retirement and life savings to purchase another, less severely damaged home and rebuild it. Now the Peppinger family members are living under one roof until the children can re-establish themselves. "No one ever thought that it was going to be this bad. When we left [evacuated], we thought, we'll be back in a few days and clean up, and everything will be all right," Peppinger said. So far Linda and John have made no decision as to what they will do with their original home.

Another obstacle to drawing the residents back to the city has been the poor administration and distribution of relief funds and services that would allow the homeowners to repair the damage to their properties. One of the major relief initiatives, dubbed the Louisiana Road Home Program, was developed by Louisiana Governor

## Before & After

### BEFORE

Lakeview area residents enjoy normal conveniences and municipal services

- Neighbors telephone each other to arrange carpooling for soccer games
- Grandparents read and send e-mails that connect them with grandchildren
- Adults come home after work and watch their favorite programs on TV
- Teens play video games on their computers when they get home from school
- Children come in from playing in backyards and local parks to raid the family refrigerator for juice and snacks
- Mail delivery brings birthday cards, monthly bills, catalogs, letters from family/friends

### AFTER

The entire Lakeview area is damaged when the levees and canals fail to hold back the floodwaters created by Katrina. Beacon of Hope Resource Centers address residential concerns facing residents and homeowners who have not yet returned.

- Provide a communication link between residents and city agencies
- Guide residents to get services and utilities restored to the Lakeview area
- Coordinate resident and volunteer groups in the work of debris and trash removal
- Provide educational seminars on mold remediation and contractor contracts
- Offer a complete resource list of competent local contractors and professional service companies who provide quality work at reasonable

Kathleen Babineaux Blanco in conjunction with the Louisiana Recovery Authority and the Office of Community Development. The program was designed to allow eligible homeowners up to \$150,000 in compensation to cover their losses and help them get back into their homes. Critics are quick to point out that in 2006, the \$756 million contract with ICF International of Fairfax, Virginia, to manage the funds produced only about \$176 million in revenue and only 177 people out of 99,000 applicants have been awarded grants. The abysmal figure represents a response rate that is only .0079 percent of the total that applied. "It is a complete breakdown of the infrastructure," John Peppinger said. "The state government is bogged down by bureaucracy and is not distributing the Road Home money, and the city government has taken a wait-and-see attitude about everything else." Beacon of Hope offers residents assistance in identifying the relief programs that are available to them and information on completing each of the application processes.

Besides offering the initial cleanup and damage assessment services and assistance in obtaining relief aid and grants, The Beacon of Hope Resource Center offers a variety of additional services to recovering communities in New Orleans. These include providing information on how residents can obtain construction licenses and permits, negotiate contracts, and inspect for and remove mold, to actually acting as a communication link between residents and city agencies in restoring services and utilities, such as electricity, mail delivery, telephone, cable, sewage and water, and trash removal. The Resource Center has also developed a referral service for licensed and approved builders, plumbers, electricians, alarm

and communication technicians, pool cleaners, landscapers and other skilled professionals.

Volunteers at the Resource Center also provide mental health services for children and adults, assistance for the elderly, free notary public rendering services, pet registration, neighborhood watch resources, rodent and insect control resources, FEMA referral information, and assistance in applying for Increased Cost of Compliance funds (ICC). Among the major supporters of Beacon of Hope are Ray Woolridge (former owner of the New Orleans Hornets basketball team), United Way, Blue Moon Fund, The Woldenberg and Goldring Family foundations, and Catholic Charities.

The long-range strategy for The Beacon of Hope Resource Center is to eventually expand out of the Lakeview district and to bring neighborhoods in other areas of the city back one at a time, in the hope that as the recovered neighborhoods start to normalize, they will reach out to surrounding areas until every community has been helped. The most successful element that has made Beacon of Hope a reality is the winning combination of hard-working local and visiting volunteers, along with a core of dedicated donors. With this winning formula, the Center will undoubtedly keep bringing the citizens of New Orleans back to their neighborhoods, eventually healing their broken city.

"Without our volunteers and contributors we would have nothing. They are our silver lining. God bless them for all that they have done for us," Linda Peppinger concluded.

The Beacon of Hope Resource Center is located at 319 W. Harrison Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70124. Telephone: (504) 872-9873. Web: [www.lakewoodbeacon.org](http://www.lakewoodbeacon.org).



**Linda Peppinger stands in what was once the living room of her Lakeview home. Linda and her husband John have not yet decided on what to do with the flood-ravaged structure.**

### *Group Members:*

*Lead Reporter: Christopher Bareck, Contributing Reporter: Deborah Payne, Photographer: Ray Casey, Driver: Shirley Bodisch*

# Different Lives Living in the Same World

In some ways, one could not imagine two more different women.

Shirley is a tall black woman with a strong voice and an even stronger countenance. A now-retired inner-city music teacher, she speaks with great passion for her field and for children. A robust laugh and contagious smile offer a glimpse of the influential educator she must have been. Lou's slight figure, pale complexion, and quiet demeanor stand in stark contrast. Her strawberry blonde hair frames a soft face, revealing the calm, gentle character of a grandmother and professional artist.

Even their experiences in the aftermath of Katrina have been markedly different. Shirley's family home of more than 40 years – paid for with sweat and sacrifice over time first by her parents, then by Shirley and her sister after their deaths – stands in the abandoned Upper Ninth Ward in an eerie time-warp state, where block after block of homes remain as they were more than a year and a half ago when the waters first receded from their peak at 13 feet. Living in a cramped apartment in another part of town, Shirley still awaits information as to whether any funding through HUD will be available to replace her home.

Lou's spacious residence, which she and her husband purchased when they relocated to New Orleans after retiring a few years ago, sits along the river. Soft hues of paint on the walls and imported tiles in the floors mask the fact that not long ago, five feet of

water filled the house. The couple did not begin the renovations to their home until after repairs to their other property – an art studio and three rental apartments in another area of New Orleans – were completed. But, by Thanksgiving time last year, both construction projects were finished.

In spite of their differences, Shirley Stewart and Lou Jordan are friends – and have been for years. And, their friendship runs deeper than their mutual love of art and their experience of utter devastation in Katrina's wake. They share a common Catholic faith and a common identity within that faith: they are both Lay Dominicans. As Dominican Laity, they are members of the international branch of the Dominican Order where lay women and men profess vows and choose to live lives based on the Dominican pillars of prayer, study, community, and preaching. They are two of about 25 members of the St. Dominic Chapter who have returned to New Orleans to rebuild their communities, their churches, and their lives. Theirs is a close-knit group that has grown even closer in the wake of the post-Katrina devastation.

Prior to the storm, The St. Dominic Chapter of the Dominican Laity had about 40 members. They formally met at St. Dominic's Church on a monthly basis to study, read scripture, pray the Liturgy of the Hours, and support one another as they strived to live out the Dominican ideals in their daily lives. The disaster that tried each member's faith individually also tried the Chapter communally; the group not only weathered the storm, but the experiences have strengthened their bonds to one another.

The story of each Chapter member is unique. Maureen and Gregory Wright,



**Lou Jordan displays many of her own paintings in her newly renovated house, with several depicting water motifs. "I have not been able to paint since the storm," she shares.**

moderator and formation director for the Chapter, respectively, lost their home to mold and water damage resulting from the more than nine feet of water that consumed their neighborhood after the levees broke. In an effort to foster stability for their teenage daughter, they made the difficult choice to purchase a new home, rather than re-build their old one. Jo Ann Cotterman, vice moderator for the Chapter, said goodbye to her two-story house near the 17th Street Canal before evacuating, but remarkably found upon her return that just a few inches of water had permeated the downstairs. Fires that burned houses just a block away spared her property, and she was able to move back in without much ceremony. Situated north of Lake Pontchartrain, provincial moderator Bruce Trigo's home remained largely undamaged. Immediately after the storm and even now, he and his wife and children have opened their home to friends and family who were not as lucky as they were.

But as these members of the chapter relate their separate experiences during and after the storm, their stories soon intersect. All express the profound relief they encountered when they were finally able to connect with one another. "You worry about your Chapter just as you worry about your family," Jo Ann expresses. As moderator, Maureen tried various times to initiate contact with chapter members



through blanket emails. "I can't explain the excitement the first time I heard that cell phone ring," she explains, noting that especially in the beginning, they found they were able to communicate via text message, even as cell phone calling coverage was inconsistent and unreliable. Little by little, they were able to confirm one another's whereabouts and begin helping one another as they were able.

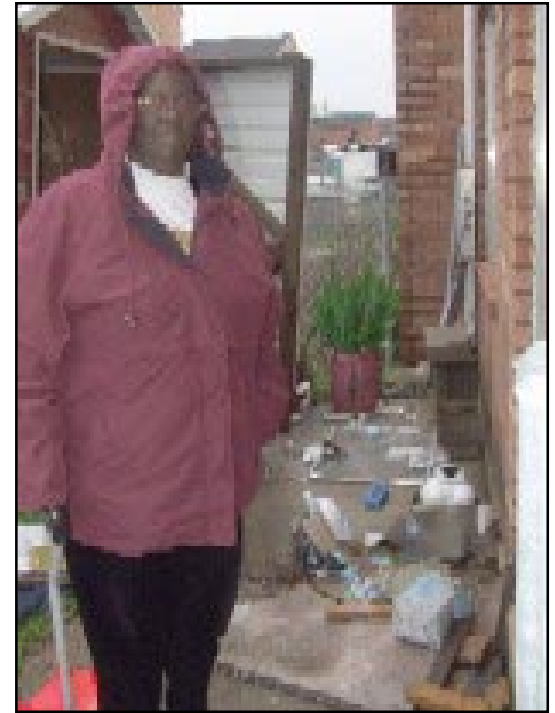
Initially their contact took the form of prayer, support, and just connecting with one another. As the city opened back up, they were able to accompany one another through the process of returning and discovering the devastation of their homes. They helped each other in recovering items from their properties and in finding suitable places to stay. At one point, Gregory was one of Bruce's grateful guests, with a one-month stay that enabled him to continue working in the city and to look for other accommodations while his family remained in a hotel hours away. Whether in baby steps or in great leaps, they have helped one another in the long recovery effort – physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

"Being a Lay Dominican, you know you are part of a family," shares Shirley. "But you never realize just how big that family is until you experience a disaster like this." In recovering from Katrina, Shirley and others found family bonds not only within their chapter, but also in the larger Dominican Family. She expresses profound gratitude for the prayerful support she has felt and for the concrete gestures

of aid she has received, including financial assistance through the Dominican Foundation that has helped her get back on her feet again. Of greatest treasure and meaning to her is a hand-made quilt she received from Dominicans in California, who sent numerous quilts to Katrina victims in the aftermath of the storm.

As in any strong family, members of the St. Dominic Chapter of the Dominican Laity have seen one another at their best and at their worst. They have celebrated triumphs together and carried one another through the worst of tragedies. They share tears with one another as easily as they share laughter, and they are able to be themselves in one another's presence. In the company of friends, outspoken Shirley shows her timid, vulnerable side as she describes the fear, frustration, and grief she has endured. Soft-spoken Lou reveals the strong woman inside her that has made tough decisions and managed two major construction projects in the name of recovery. Even amid their outward differences, Shirley and Lou – and the whole group of friends – know their common bonds hold them more tightly together than any societal stereotypes.

And so, almost two years after the disaster, the recovery work continues, personally and communally. Like so many, members of the St. Dominic



**A sister-in-law plant has reestablished itself in a pink bucket amid the debris and stench behind Shirley Stewart's Ninth Ward townhouse.**

Chapter of the Dominican Laity say they have learned what really matters in life, and they count one another and the larger Dominican Family among their most important treasures. They recognize that not only with the city of New Orleans never be the same, neither will they. And some of that is not all bad.

**Group Members:**

**Lead Reporter: Karen Clay,  
Contributing Reporter: Peggy Ryan, Photographer: Dusty Farnan**

**Before & After**

**BEFORE:**

- 40 Lay Dominicans prepare to attend their 3:00 PM monthly Chapter meeting
- Candidates in formation meet with their directors at 2:00 PM
- Some professed members arrive early to catch up on news of each other's families
- At 3:00 PM everyone gathers in St. Dominic's Church to pray Dominican Office, share reflection on the Scriptures, discuss the common study topic, conduct the business section of their meeting

**AFTER:**

- Family decisions to evacuate or to seek shelter scattered the members of the Lay Chapter of New Orleans Dominicans
- After several weeks, by using cell phones and text messaging, the leaders of the Chapter contacted all their members only to learn that many are surviving in dangerous, over-crowded situations, often with insufficient food and water
- People, transported out-of-state, live separated from family members
- Chapter Leader Bruce Trigo's home

– damaged but not destroyed – becomes "The Trigo Hilton" for homeless Chapter members and neighbors

- Shirley lost everything to the flood waters
- Greg and Maureen cannot rebuild their flooded home
- JoAnn's home and career are both damaged
- Lou's sense of sadness since the storm blocks her artistic talent
- The remnant 25 members of the Chapter meet wherever they can for common prayer and Dominican community support

# Telling the Story

In the midst of the Hurricane Katrina aftermath, there in the flooded basement offices of the Spirituality Center at Notre Dame Seminary, sat a small Pueblo clay “storyteller” figurine virtually untouched as if to proclaim that Sr. Noel Toomey, OP, and others at the center should continue their ministry and keep “telling the story.”

“As Dominicans, as preachers, we need to keep reverencing the story but help people focus on what’s the blessing right now,” said Sr. Noel, a Eucharistic Missionary who is in her 25th year as the center’s director.

The story, by now, everyone knows. On Aug. 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the city of New Orleans causing a breach in the levees submerging 80 percent of the city in floodwaters. What is hard to see in the devastation still evident 17 months later is the blessing, but Sr. Noel encourages everyone to seek it.

“The wonderful thing in all this sadness is the feeling of what’s important ... What lasts and what drifts away – that’s the preaching gift through the disaster,” she said.

Despite losing 25 years of her classroom notes and professional resources as well as many personal items in the offices, Sr. Noel doesn’t look at what was lost but what was gained by the center in the storm’s aftermath. “We’ve come out very well,” she said. The center was moved from the basement of a building at Notre Dame Seminary to the second floor of a building next door. This is the result of a lesson the seminary learned from the devastation ... a classroom with chairs and tables can be replaced much easier than offices with years of notes and personal items. What once served as a chapel now serves as teaching and office areas for the center.

Flood insurance covered the actual structure of the building, but not the contents. Sr. Noel and the staff at the Spirituality Center were left to rely on the generosity of others for items necessary to continue the ministry – another blessing.

“Everything inside had to be replaced but the generosity of people brought us pretty close to where we were before,” she said.

Through the assistance of Notre

## Before & After

### BEFORE

- Sister Noel Toomey, OP, Eucharistic Missionary of St. Dominic, in her 25<sup>th</sup> year as the center’s director, ministers from her basement-level office

- Within easy reach are her 25 years of classroom notes, professional resources, files and personal items

- Among personal items is a small Pueblo clay “storyteller” figurine

- An extensive library serves the needs of seminary staff and students

### AFTER

- The Spirituality Center office, devastated by the flood waters, moved to a higher location on the second floor of a nearby building on the Notre Dame campus

- All of the Spirituality Center materials were destroyed by water, but through a gift from Ave Maria Press, the Center has a new library of contemporary spirituality resources

- The “storyteller” figurine escaped virtually untouched as if to proclaim that Sr. Noel and others at the Center should continue their ministry and keep “telling the story”

- Spiritual direction continues, but with an added challenge of listening to people’s stories of suffering inflicted by the hurricane and its aftermath, and of helping them move forward in their lives, recognizing the enduring presence of God with them

- In working through loss and pain of the Katrina experience, people must tell their story over and over. Sr. Noel encourages the telling of the whole story - the pain of losses and also the blessings of good people who were generous companions through the ordeal

- Sr. Noel’s ministry of listening is shaped now by a key lesson from the devastation: when people are “pushed to the edge,” they know deeply what is important. This graced awareness of what is most valued “must stay in the retold story, for this is the wisdom that comes from tragedy”



Communicators Elaine Osborne, OP (Great Bend) and Dana Lear Brantley (Kentucky) look at the photos made by Sr. Noel Toomey, OP (EMD), of the damage the flood waters did to the basement offices of the Spirituality Center.



Dame, Ava Maria Press donated books to the center providing “better contemporary spirituality resources” than they had before the storm. Thanks to the generosity of others, the new books are stored on nine new bookcases.

Even though the offices themselves have changed at the Spirituality Center, their work continues as before. But, Sr. Noel said, the experience of Katrina didn’t change the ministry as much as add a new dimension as people began to rebuild their lives and homes. People need someone to talk to not just about their spiritual direction, but what they experienced during the ordeal, Sr. Noel said. The center provides that listening ear for those still dealing with the effects of Katrina.

“I didn’t cry over the devastation, I cried over the experience of people,” Sr. Noel said as she recounted stories of those she’s spoken with since returning to New Orleans in October 2005.

She told the story of a former student who is now a chaplain for the New Orleans Police Department. Haunted by gruesome images of people he tried to rescue, their pleading voices played ceaselessly in his head as he struggled to sleep at night. She told him: “You’ll never lose those images, but you also need to keep the pictures

of life and hope you made possible.” Pictures like that of a week-old baby he found turning blue in its screaming mother’s hand, its tiny arms hanging limp. He knew that infant was dying or already dead, but carefully he breathed into its mouth and gently as he could,

pressed two fingers on its fragile chest, almost futilely urging it to come back. Finally, he saw a little arm pop up, and the child began breathing on its own. Sr. Noel urged him to always remember that little arm popping up showing signs of life.

Stories like this one are too numerous to count, but they must be told, Sr. Noel said. “People can’t forget the stories of sadness because it is out of those stories that the blessings come.”



**Sr. Noel Toomey, OP (EMD), shows off the new shelving put in place in the new office of the Spirituality Center.**

Just like that clay storyteller figurine, Sr. Noel and the others at the Spirituality Center made it through the storm so they can continue to tell their story.

***Group Members***

***Lead Reporter: Dana Lear Brantley, Contributing Reporter: Jean Mullolly and Elaine Osborne, Photographer and Driver: Rebecca Peak***

***Continued from Page 3***

the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

The storm and subsequent flood damaged virtually every structure in St. Bernard Parish and water stood five to seven feet throughout.

Lakeview was the second most damaged area of New Orleans. It was under 14 feet or more of water.

The water is gone, but the story isn’t over for the residents of New Orleans who desperately want to return home. Basic needs and services most Americans take for granted are difficult to come by for some New Orleanians. Many utility companies don’t want to run lines to neighborhoods unless there are several houses in that area in need. In some areas there are no street lights making it difficult to maneuver at night. Some are even finding it hard to regain mail delivery at their home.

**SEEING IS BELIEVING**

A picture is worth a thousand words – or so they say – but even pictures cannot capture the full impact of the devastation caused by Katrina. That was the feeling among many of the Dominican communicators who visited New Orleans during the 2007 OPCOMNET Conference in January. Seeing the devastation first hand, realizing how much worse it must have been a year and a half prior, and hearing personal accounts brought to light the fact that the story isn’t over even though it may have disappeared from the news. Something terrible happened to the people of New Orleans, among them members of the Dominican family. This project attempts to shed some light on the untold story of New Orleans, how Katrina effected the Dominicans in New Orleans, their battle to rebuild and how they are coping two years later.



**These homeowners, like the other residents, believe in the city's desire and determination to bring New Orleans back.**

*Story by  
Dana Lear Brantley*

## Before & After

### BEFORE

- This school is a community in the Dominican tradition of prayer and blessing
- 1,065 students study and grow here
- A close bond with alumnae enriches the community spirit in St. Mary's
- Faculty and students make good use of the peaceful chapel, the well-equipped library, technology centers, band and art rooms.
- President Cynthia Thomas expresses frustration with the lack of progress on the construction of Siena Center; what should have been an enclosed building by August 2005 was "only a concrete base and steel frame"

### AFTER

- 18 inches of water filled the school; the mold grew, causing \$4.5 million in damage
- In Atlanta, President Cynthia Thomas received a phone call from a school parent, "You will have a lot to face and we are going to be with you."
- The administration, faculty and staff located and created an on-going personal connection with every student in their evacuation sites
- The Siena Center contractor switched projects, transferring to recovery work with a professional recovery contractor
- The library had to be re-stacked; mold destroyed all the books and resource materials
- Shelving had to be replaced in the band and art rooms

### Group members

**Lead Reporter: Beth Murphy,**

**Contributing Reporter: Janet**

**Brown, Photographer: Joan**

**Smith, Driver: Jo Ann Neihaus**

## St. Mary's Dominican High School: A Wave of Success

**A**fter Hurricane Katrina took New Orleans by storm on Aug. 29, 2005, a tsunami of organizational skills rose up from the ranks of St. Mary's Dominican High School administrators, teachers, staff, and alumnae. This visionary storm created an unprecedented wave of successful rehabilitation at the school.

Seventeen months after Katrina, except for the stack-less library or the lack of shelving in the band and art rooms, visitors who were unaware might not realize the school sustained \$4.5 million in damages after the hurricane, when levies holding back Lake Ponchartrain were breeched flooding much of the city, including the St. Mary's New Orleans Dominican-sponsored school on Walmsley Street in the Carrollton district.

The day after the storm a school parent reached its president, Cynthia Thomas in Atlanta, where she evacuated before the storm. "Do not be overwhelmed," she recalls him saying to her. "You will have a lot to face and we are going to be with you."

About 18 inches of water filled the school, minimal in a city that had significant portions under 10 feet or more of fetid, toxic sludge. But it was early October before administrators were let back into the school. By that time, mold had colonized the once proudly immaculate building, so that nearly all of the schools' contents were lost.

By September 2006, barely 13 months after Katrina hit, the school community dedicated Siena Center, a brand new, collegiate-level athletic



**St. Mary's Dominican High School suffered \$4.5 million in damages at the hands of Hurricane Katrina, but with dedication and determination the school was able to reopen less than five months after the storm.**

facility that sports a state-of-the-art dance studio and training facility. Prior to the storm, Thomas said, she was frustrated with the construction project because it was falling behind schedule. What should have been an enclosed building by August 2005 was at that time only a concrete and steel frame.

"Thank God we were late with construction" Thomas says, as she fumbles with a ring of keys to grant her guests entrance to the new facility.

The delayed construction project brought another hidden blessing to the school. The Siena Center contractor quickly switched projects, transferring to recovery efforts and securing the services of a professional recovery service. The school reopened on Jan. 17, 2006, less than five months after the disaster.



Thomas acknowledges that it was the professionalism of the school's administrators, teachers and staff, and the dedication of Dominican families, alumnae and other supporters that made such rapid recovery from crisis possible.

Key to the success, she suggests, were the six organizational principles that guided her team through the recovery process: "Prayer, people, program, policy, property and preaching," Thomas enumerates. "And always people first."

Thomas worked long distance with her administrative team and the school's board of directors to coordinate recovery efforts. Her priorities were to make contact with school families, ascertain the level of damage to the school, and craft a plan for recovery.

Within three weeks of Katrina nearly all of the 1,065 Dominican students were located by school staff, and the process of visiting the school families in their evacuation locations began. Thomas and the other administrators wanted to be sure the school families saw a face from Dominican in their time of need.

Weekly board of director's meetings via teleconference began the recovery process. It was at one such meeting that the board made the daring decision to continue paying salaries for all of their employees while simultaneously either refunding or deferring tuition for school families. "It made no sense," Thomas acknowledges, yet she and the board were convinced it was the right thing to do. "We've been blessed by that decision," she adds. A year and a half after the tragedy, school enrollment stands at 87percent of pre-Katrina levels, most of the faculty and staff returned, and the esprit d' corps couldn't be higher.

The generosity of other supporters has been a major factor in the school recovery process. Grants came from such sources as the Laura Bush Foundation, Ford Motor Credit and the pop singer Josh Groban. A development consultant who had previously worked with the school offered the services of his firm, pro bono. With his help, within three weeks of the storm and before most other institutions had been able to assess their damages,



**Principal Cynthia Thomas shows Janet Brown, OP (Grand Rapids) and Beth Murphy, OP (Springfield) photographs of damage the flood waters caused to the high school. Eighteen inches of water flooded the school causing mold to colonize inside before administrators were let inside in October 2005.**

Dominican had an emergency appeal letter in the mailboxes of their alumnae, who responded generously.

Dominican also benefited from the generosity of other Dominican high schools and communities around the U.S. About 180 students from St. Mary's Dominican transferred to two schools in Houston run by the Houston Dominican Sisters, St. Agnes and St. Pius X. No one was turned away for lack of ability to pay and the students were provided with uniforms and free meals for the duration.

The technology staff at St. Pius was crucial to successful student location efforts. They hastily built and hosted a website that became the centerpiece of the efforts to contact the Dominican High School diaspora. Students at Rosary High School in Aurora, Ill., raised more than \$10,000 to replace the books in the library, every one of which was destroyed by mold. Other Dominican congregations also reached out, supporting the students and faculty with prayer, fundraising efforts or pro bono grant-writing.

In her own reflection on her experience of Katrina and its aftermath, Thomas says she feels like the Dominican High School community is doing their best to preach the message of

paschal mystery by their response to the crisis, immediate and on-going.

Perhaps the greatest challenges the school faced as a result of Katrina are behind them, but by no means is the struggle over. Enrollment is in good shape but is not yet at pre-Katrina levels. It may be a challenge to keep teachers as families are faced with making other choices based on economic necessity, energy bills are three times the level they were in the fall of 2005, and it is still an open question whether the city will be able to work its way back to life.

One of Thomas's ongoing frustrations is that "the system is not working" on behalf of the well-being of the city of New Orleans. She can point to the reality of the school community and see that. Thirty-four of her teachers lost their homes in Katrina and some of them are still living in FEMA trailers. She says she doesn't have all the answers, that she and the school staff are still finding the way through the post-Katrina reality, but she is sure about one thing. "I am doubly committed to Catholic education," she says emphatically. "We need people with the power and the morals to make a difference and change systems."



# Everyone has a story

“Everybody has a story,” or so the saying goes in New Orleans today. Every person’s narrative adds a special dimension to understanding the impact of Hurricane Katrina. Here are two such stories from the Dominican High School community.

Looking at the girls today in the halls of Dominican High, you would never know there had been a Katrina and a flood. Everything is so normal!

But talk to senior Erin Grefer and you hear a story that is fresh and easily re-lived in the telling. “My family evacuated first to Mississippi and then to Keller, Texas, where my aunt lives. We spent two months there, fourteen people in the house, three of them ages 2, 3, and 5. I bet my aunt was thinking: When can I have my house back?”

The thin 17-year-old shook her ponytail with an easy laugh as she said “How blest we were. We lost our house, but I was never hungry. And we had a home to stay in. And I made new friends that I still call today and keep up with. If anything good could come out of that storm, it did for me. When asked what she missed most from her lost house, she said: “Of course it was the family pictures, videos of my mother who died when I was seven.”

Erin commuted to Arlington to attend Nolan High School, a catholic high school run by the Marianists who “did their best to make me feel welcome. It meant a lot to me when someone asked me to sit with her in the cafeteria. But I missed the sense of bonding that I had with the other girls back at Dominican High School.

“Losing the material things showed me how unimportant they are, but being home and with my family is what really counted, and that’s something I used to take for granted. If I’ve learned anything from this experience, it is to be grateful, and I want to try to live out my gratitude by doing for others the way someone did for me.”

Beverly Gaines, the attendant secretary at Dominican also considers



**A student from St. Mary's Dominican High School tells the story of her experience during Hurricane Katrina's aftermath to the writing team.**

herself blessed. “I got a frantic call from my mother, who is usually very calm, to say we had to evacuate. So my mother, father, brother, sister, husband and my little son Forest, caravanned to Humble, Texas, just north of Houston. Another sister thought she was safe on the third floor of her condo, and had to be airlifted by helicopter as the waters rose. We picked her up in Baton Rouge.”

Gaines’ son cried every day as he went into his second grade class in a strange school.

“When I talked to someone from Dominican, I would always say: ‘Tell whoever is doing attendance not to get too comfortable because I am coming back.’”

Gaines and her family came back in September, in time for Forest to start

third grade at St. Anthony of Padua, the Dominican-run parish and school where Sr. Ruth Angelette, a member of the St. Mary’s congregation, is principal. The Gaineses are living in an apartment while their house in Gentilly, which had to be gutted, is being rebuilt from the inside out.

But no matter what, Gaines is happy to be home. “When students saw me in the halls at Dominican, they would squeal with delight, ‘Miz Gaines! You’re back!’ That made me feel so good.” When asked if she felt safe moving back to New Orleans, she said: “This is home! Houston was wonderful, but you want to be home.”

## *Group members*

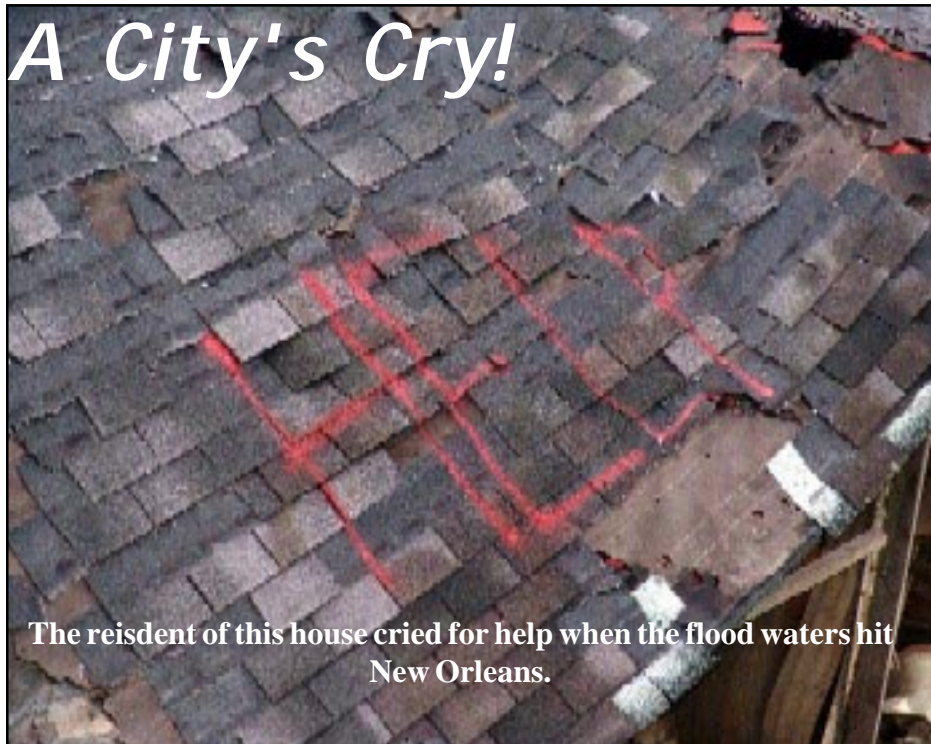
***Beth Murphy, Janet Brown, Joan Smith and JoAnn Neihaus***



**Sr. Frances Sullivan, OP, principal of Mount St. Dominic Academy in Caldwell, N.J. brought a poster with the greetings from her students to the New Orleans students when she came to help out with the cleanup efforts.**

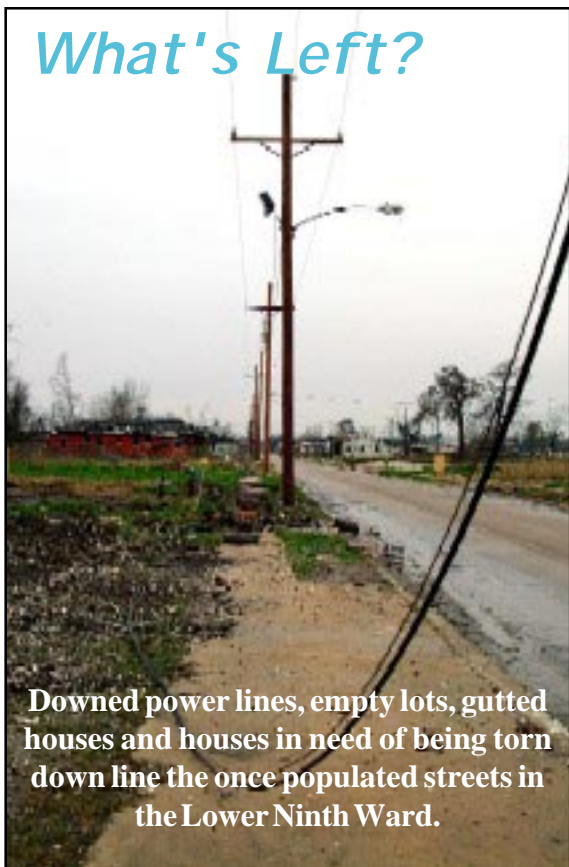
## *New Orleans -- After the Storm*

### *A City's Cry!*



The resident of this house cried for help when the flood waters hit New Orleans.

### *What's Left?*



Downed power lines, empty lots, gutted houses and houses in need of being torn down line the once populated streets in the Lower Ninth Ward.

### *Ninth Ward Disaster*



It is reported that the Lower Ninth Ward comprises the vast majority of hurricane damaged territory still without noticeable improvement.



# Being Eucharist in a Hungry City

**S**r. Diane Hooley, OP, is devoted to very vulnerable people, in a service surrounded by an almost unimaginable situation. She is a hospice chaplain in New Orleans. She is a spiritual companion to people who are facing their own death in a city that itself is trying to come back from the brink of death after Hurricane Katrina.

Diane, along with chaplain Alberta Schindler, OP, works for Serenity Hospice Center, a small private hospice service through which they are companions for people in the throes of terminal illness, who are on the ultimate life journey. Diane cares for the spiritual and pastoral well being of people who, in some cases, lost everything they had in the hurricane, and then have to face the final most personal loss of all. Their loved ones receive the support and care of these Dominican sisters who help them make it through the loss of someone they love.

Diane is a Eucharistic Missionary of St. Dominic, so that means she brings a missionary's heart to a city that looks like a war zone in many places. Whole neighborhoods stand empty, decaying and dark. City services are sparse, mail service in some sections, non-existent. FEMA trailers stand on the front lawns of homes that look abandoned, but hold some measure of promised rebirth. Other parts of the city look almost normal, if you discount the noticeable number of houses with scaffolding or great sheets of blue tarp covering roofs or sides of buildings. Don't let the Superdome or the French Quarter fool you – New Orleans is not back to normal by any stretch of the imagination.

Today, there are five Eucharistic Missionary Dominicans working in New Orleans. The affectionate shorthand for their congregation is "EMDs." They are five of 33 members of the congregation of Dominicans whose lives were altered forever by the breach in the levees in August 2005. Other EMDs in New Orleans include Noel Toomey, OP, who



**Sr. Diane Hooley, OP, speaks to members of OPCOMNET about her experiences as a chaplain with Serenity Hospice Center**

is a spiritual director at the archdiocese of New Orleans; Kathy Brussard, OP, who is a forensic social worker, a person who assesses the needs of people who are convicted of a capital crime and Suzanne Brauer, OP, an EMD who serves on the congregation's leadership team as treasurer and at St. Paul the Apostle Parish in New Orleans East.

Diane and Alberta see about 70 patients, a little more than half of them in a nearby nursing home. The rest of the hospice patients are in their homes. Many of them are senior citizens who have lost their homes and cannot talk about the loss; some cannot even look at where the remains of their homes stand. Still others are traumatized just to hear an occasional heavy rainstorm on the roof. The stress of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath has increased the death rate. People are hungry for what feels like normal, are hungry to know 'how'd you do?' – the greeting many returning residents use to catch up with friends and get news of progress. Social conversation is about recovery, about FEMA, about forms and applica-

tions for services.

"No words make this easy," Diane said. "I am learning to have the same faith as people here." Diane described a heartbreaking story of a family whose four-year-old child is terminally ill, the father, in a wheelchair after a motorcycle accident. One child had already died of a congenital illness. They live in a one bedroom FEMA trailer. This is missionary territory. The missionary takes up the task where the work is needed. Thus, the Eucharistic Missionaries are alive and well in New Orleans.

The FEMA trailer family did not have money for a funeral, and friends and neighbors pitched in. This is the story of New Orleans now; friends and neighbors are helping each other with the added encouragement of volunteers from around the country. You get the feeling the city government is in a semi-comatose state, overwhelmed by red tape, lack of personnel and mismanagement. Other solutions are emerging, slowly, very slowly.

Dying is hard enough, but the idea of a dying child in a one bedroom FEMA trailer? That escapes your





**Sr. Diane Hooley visits many people in FEMA trailers just like these during her work with hospice. Imagine how a man in a wheelchair maneuvers through a one room trailer.**

imagination. The child's father is in a wheelchair after a motorcycle accident. How does one maneuver a wheelchair in a one bedroom trailer? Diane shows up just to check in, to listen, to visit and to pray, to let them know they are not alone. That presence feeds a soul like Eucharist.

Diane reflects on the faith of the people she encounters and recognizes that many good gifts come their way in the form of prayer, emotional support, physical support and volunteers who help rebuild. They all express tremen-

dous gratitude. Everyone recognizes that there is always someone else they will meet who suffered more or who lost more. And the devastation of the city is still more than evident there, everyday. You cannot miss it.

Thank God the Dominicans are still there.

**Group Members**  
**Lead Reporter and Photographer: Anne Lythgoe, Contributing Reporter: Kathy Nolan**

## Where Are They Now?

The other story of the EMDs in New Orleans is their own evacuation and resettlement with the Dominican Sisters of Catharine, Ky.

Three days before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and the levees broke spilling a wall of water the city streets, the Eucharistic Missionaries evacuated their most vulnerable members to Kentucky, home of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine. "We were overwhelmed by the welcome and goodness of the people who helped us," said Diane Hooley, OP, hospice chaplain working in New Orleans. The Kentucky Sisters gave them a place to stay, to pray, and gave them clothes and books. "We were prepared for three days, nothing beyond that." The Adrian Dominicans donated six automobiles to give them the mobility they needed.

Since then, 17 EMDs have settled in St. Catharine. Of the total 33 members, five are in New Orleans, five others in Louisiana, four in Arizona, two in Michigan and one in Florida. Recently, all seven Dominican Cluster congregations voted to petition Rome for permission to become one new congregation. So the Eucharistic Missionaries, along with their sisters in the other six congregations, are looking toward beginning yet another journey together.

## Before & After

### BEFORE

- 22 members of the EMD's minister daily by bringing their missionary hearts to NOLA people in need of medical assistance, spiritual comfort, emotional support

- Hospice chaplain Diane Hooley, OP works with chaplain Alberta Schindler, OP for Serenity Hospice Center

- Diane and Alberta minister to about 70 patients, about 60% of whom live in a nearby nursing home and the rest in their own or family members' homes

- Three days before Katrina hit New Orleans, the EMD's evacuated their most vulnerable members to safety with the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine in Kentucky

- The Adrian, Mich. Dominican Sisters donated six cars to provide transportation for the EMD's

### AFTER

- 12 retired EMD's relocated in Kentucky and Michigan

- 8 live in New Orleans; 5 in Louisiana; 4 in Arizona; 2 in Michigan; 1 in Florida

- Diane and Alberta spent countless anxious days trying to locate their hospice patients

- Their patients – mostly senior citizens – have lost their homes and cannot talk about the loss

- Many seriously ill patients are traumatized just to hear an occasional heavy rainstorm on the roof

- Not all of their patients survived Katrina's devastation; the patients' families now receive the support and care of these Dominican sisters to help them through yet another loss

- Diane's presence with one particular family "feeds their soul like Eucharist." The family lives in a one-bedroom FEMA trailer; the 4-year-old child is terminally ill; the father uses a wheelchair (in a one-bedroom FEMA trailer?); when their other child died of a congenital illness, friends and neighbors paid for the funeral

# The Dominican Family Responds

It would not be possible to name all the ways in which the Dominican Family responded to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. We are very aware of the visible examples of compassion, support and action taken by Dominican sisters, friars, associates, nuns and laity in the United States and around the world. One goal of the Faith and Hope in New Orleans series is to share what did happen to the Dominicans in New Orleans well after the events of August, 2005. Some efforts may not be described here, but this is a simple illustration that the world is indeed connected and we are family to one another.

Many sent email messages of sympathy and encouragement, contributed donations and volunteered time and talent to assist not only the Dominican Family in New Orleans, but the whole city.

The Dominican Sisters of Hope sent teams of medical volunteers and supplies in the spring of 2006. The volunteers set up shop at Audubon Zoo in uptown New Orleans. The Remote Area Medical group of RAM

became an "oasis of hope" and relief to those with myriads of medical needs. RAM provided over 9800 units of care. The Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids sent sisters to work among us during Holy Week of 2006. The sisters were awed and humbled by their experience, especially the cross made from wood from the storm's debris and used for Good Friday services.

Great Bend Dominican volunteers arrived in the summer of 2006 to assist in restoring Resurrection of Our Lord Church and School in New Orleans East. Ten young women and their chaperones, including four Dominican sisters of the ministry Mission of Hope arrived in the heat and humidity of the deep south.

Springfield Dominicans also sent aid in the form of medical assistance to residents of the Gulf coast setting up shop outside the First Baptist Church of Biloxi, MS. St. Dominic's Health Services of Jackson, MS received and treated displaced patients from affected hospitals along the coast. St. Dominic physicians,

clinicians and staff traveled to Biloxi to serve at makeshift primary care clinics.

Adrian Dominicans began arriving in the fall of 2006 and committed themselves to two to three months of work to help with rebuilding community.

Dominicans from the Northeast Six congregations visited in July, 2007 to volunteer in a number of projects. They included Dominicans of Hope, Sparkill, Amityville, Caldwell and Blauvelt. Over a five-week period, 26 sisters served in housing, food pantry service, tutoring in a summer children's camp, home visiting, clerical assistance, library assistance and special services. They spent time visiting affected areas of the region, particularly the Lower 9th Ward where the Eucharistic Missionaries serve.

When the Dominican Communicators' Network visited New Orleans in January of 2007, over and over again we heard the same reminder: Don't forget about us, don't forget New Orleans."

We haven't and neither has the rest of the Family.

## Home is Where Your Heart is

For some of the Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic associates, there may be some truth to the cliché "you can't go home again." Over half of the 48 associates were directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina with 14 of those from the Greater New Orleans area not being able to return to their original address, and they have no plans to return.

EMD Sr. Jeanne Moore, OP, said that the majority of associates evacuated and were gone for several weeks or longer. "Some were able to patch their roof and go on," she said. Others weren't that lucky. Most stayed away months, some in other parts of the state or country with three in other countries, while their houses were gutted and underwent

major repairs.

"We are finding it harder now than we originally thought it would be," Moore said. With only six of the 24 EMDs who were in New Orleans currently in the city, the associates and sisters are not able to connect in the same way. Associates, as well as others in the city, are finding that their parishes are closed. Their city, their lives, their homes have been forever changed by the events in August 2005.

"The sisters are using most of their energy to recommit to their ministry under these trying circumstances," Moore said.

The whereabouts of all the associates is now known, but the fate of everyone wasn't immediately known.

"It took several months to find where everyone landed and many times

that address was just temporary," Moore said of the fact that often times the associates we staying with friends or family until more permanent arrangements could be made or until they could move back to the city.

The Internet was the key in locating everyone, she said, and remains a vital tool in staying connected. Twice a month a mailing called "EMD Update" is sent out to keep everyone informed.

Unfortunately many of the EMD associates, like more than half of the population of New Orleans before Katrina, are finding that you can't go home again. But, they are also finding another cliché to be just as true – "Home is where your heart is."

*Story by:  
Dana Lear Brantley*



## *New Orleans -- After the Storm*

# *Hometown Nightmare*



What had been predicted by some weather experts for years finally happened. The levee's protecting New Orleans breached causing the city's worst nightmare to come true.

## *A Familiar Sight*



Debris lining the streets as well as For Sale signs such as these are all too familiar sights throughout the city.

## *Sign of Progress*



Despite the storm that left 80 percent of the city underwater, the people of New Orleans are rebuilding and moving home in some areas.



# C'est Si Bon:

## Friars Fully Engaged in Post-Katrina Recovery

**W**hat is C'est si bon

(translation: It's so good)? Is it a popular song recorded by Eartha Kitt? Is it the name of a restaurant on St. Charles Street? Is it a positive spirit to be found in New Orleans among those committed to rebuilding a severely damaged city? The answer is: all of the above.

Signs throughout the city bravely declare, "We'll be back." Meanwhile the presence of Dominican friars in Louisiana continues as it has since 1911 and now, seventeen months after Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath of flood, the men seem truly undaunted by the monumental challenges that still lie ahead.

OPCOMNET, a network of communicators serving the Dominican provinces of men and congregations of women in



**Fr. Charles Latour, OP at St. Anthony of Padua Priory, explains the damage done to the priory as a result of Katrina.**

the U.S., met in New Orleans in January to experience the state of the Dominican Family since the disaster. One of the teams visited five Southern Province friars to get a sense of what their experience had been since August 29, 2005 and what they see moving forward.

of New Orleans, and were woefully underinsured for the water damage they sustained.

We caught up with Bro. Herman Johnson between classes at Xavier University, an institution that is Catholic and historically serves the Black student body. With its purpose

The Southern Province has its Provincial office in Metairie. The building sustained wind damage, but did not flood. Fr. Emiliano Zapata, OP, Socius and Vicar Provincial, shared that there are currently 19 friars living and ministering in the city. They live in two priories and lead two parishes: St. Anthony of Padua on Canal Street in Mid-City and St. Dominic in the Lakeview district. The parish buildings, including the schools, belong to the Archdiocese

### Before & After

#### BEFORE

- 30 friars lived and ministered in New Orleans
- Friars preached the Good News in two parishes, through two campus ministry centers and in various outreach ministries
- The Provincial Office in New Orleans coordinated Dominican life and mission among the friars
- St. Dominic Parish facilities, home for 10 friars, and a strong base for a thriving Catholic community of 2500 families with a vibrant Chapter of Lay Dominicans was served by 4 friars on staff; parish weekly income of \$18,000

#### AFTER

- All thirty New Orleans brothers, six employees and their families accounted for and physically safe but 25 friars left homeless after Katrina
- Friars displaced to other cities, other states; they lost all of their clothing and personal items
- Two OP churches, two priories and the provincial office building suffered major damage from flooding and looting
- Wind and water destroyed most vehicles used for ministry
- Campus ministries at Tulane University and Xavier University are indefinitely suspended

- All 1<sup>st</sup> floor facilities at St. Dominic Parish have to be gutted and restored; every pew in the church has to be replaced; school furnishings and instructional supplies have to be replaced
- The St. Dominic parish community now numbers 1200 families, has only 2 friars on staff, parish income of \$9,000, had to cut 1 staff member and 1 maintenance man
- St. Anthony of Padua Church also sustained a major loss of congregational membership, structural damage, loss of most of the interior furnishings

to promote a more just and humane society, Xavier prepares its students to assume roles of leadership and service in society.

Bro. Herman, professor of Spanish in the Modern Languages Department, is a native New Orleanian who elected to remain in the city and assist his neighbors: 33 sick and elderly people who were trapped in their homes. As was reported by Claudia McDonnell of Catholic New York in October 2005, Bro. Herman recalled that "Many of them were lying in bed when we rescued them. The mattresses were already floating. After we swam to them, we would walk in the water, dragging the mattress. We floated them to our house."

For a time, Bro. Herman, like so many others, had to learn to cope without many of the things most of us take for granted: a clean, safe place to live, a regular job, a sense of normalcy. "But," he said, "it's helping me to deepen my prayer life, to come to know who I am as I am, (apart from) the externals that humans use to define themselves."

Bro. Herman is thrilled that Xavier University was reopened as of January 2005 and hopes the school will be able to regain the students and teachers who were forced to leave and have not been able to return. "I wanted to return to continue our 75 plus year tradition of Dominicans at Xavier."

"I'm hopeful that we'll again be a great city and a great university, but it will take time. The city was racked with social ills before Katrina. Racism is a perennial problem in New Orleans. In rebuilding the city it won't work to ignore the poor."

We asked Bro. Herman what he would wish for if guaranteed that he could be granted three. He told us he prays that the inner city parishes and schools that were closed will be re-opened, that there will be more assistance for Xavier University students, 90 percent of whom rely on financial aid, and that the priory will be restored so that he can return there to live with his brothers.

As he left us to administer a test to his class downstairs, he assured us, "Every day I do see grace to do things in a new way."

A trip to St. Dominic Parish meant a sobering ride through Lakeview which was flooded when several wall panels of the 17th Street Canal levee failed. What was once a lovely middle-class neighborhood of 12,500 households now looks like a war zone. Some lots have been scraped clean, some homes have been gutted, some are being rebuilt, but many more stand, badly damaged, rotting and abandoned.

We were fortunate to find Fr. Paul Watkins in the trailer being used as the parish office at St. Dominic, and he generously took time to show us the priory and the church. "We had 3,600 families here before Katrina; now we have 1,200," he told us. He showed us the windowless second-floor stairwell where the Prior Provincial, Marty Gleeson, OP, and a friar, Chrys Finn, OP, had taken shelter, set up an altar and prayed before being rescued by boat.

Fr. Paul smiled as he showed us the work that is being done to restore the priory where eight to ten feet of water

flooded the first floor. He was still smiling as he outlined the massive cleanup that had to be done in the church, and the plans for new lighting and new pews. The parishioners make do for now with folding metal chairs. It was beginning to occur to us that smiling is what one does in this phase of the recovery of New Orleans, because what is the alternative? If one had any doubt, one only needed to see the children on the playground at the school to recall that they count on having their lives rebuilt.

Next we drove across town to St. Anthony Priory, where we came upon Fr. Charles Latour, OP, busily overseeing the restoration of the three-story, 80 year old building. "It's a great day," he told us, "because today the friars' mattresses were delivered. No furniture yet, but the mattresses arrived!" When the three story building is ready, the 11 friars assigned to St. Anthony will be able to live in community once again; for now they meet for evening meals and three friars live in a rented house nearby.

The pastor, Fr. Ian Bordenave, waved as he came from one meeting on his way to another and expressed his regret that he couldn't stop to chat. While the school was flooded, the church was not, and only about 60 families have not returned since Katrina.

At the end of the day, we were tired. It wasn't that the day had been physically taxing, but because we had seen and heard so much that expressed fear, confusion, loss, sadness and frustration. But at the same time, we had witnessed many signs of hope. The friars of the Southern Province we met are sincerely energized by the work before them. In fact, they see it as an opportunity to preach the Word of faith in God, even in the midst of a massive and slow recovery from one of this country's worst natural disasters.

### ***Group Members***

***Lead Reporter: Kate Martin,  
Contributing Reporter, Donna  
Brunell, Photographer: Al Judy  
and Lucy Sanchez, Driver:  
Isabelle Williamson***



**Father Al Judy points to the high water mark on the statue of St. Dominic in front of the church at St. Dominic Parish**



# Water Memories

**S**r. Patricia Rogers was principal at St. Mary Academy in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit. She had been in that school for three years. The school was not rebuilt. She left New Orleans with five other sisters. After 11 hours on the road, a man and woman they had never met offered their home to the group, providing food and needed medication. After a week, the sisters were invited to stay at a convent in Rayne, LA. Sr. Patricia is now Director of Vocation Ministry for the Sinsinawa Dominicans in the United States and living in Chicago.

Water brings to mind different thoughts and memories for different people. Listening to or watching a slow moving stream, a waterfall, or waves on a lake or an ocean is a spiritual experience for many. The calming effect of water can create positive energy and inner peace and helps some commune

with God.

Water's many properties and characteristics are what make water so special. Its beauty and calming effect are so romanticized in our culture that we overlook the damage poor water quality has on life and water's power to destroy.

Hurricanes are storms that form over a body of water. A hurricane is composed of high winds, rain, and thunderstorms. The reported by-products of a hurricane are tornados, floods, wind and hail storms, mass destruction, and deaths.

Aug. 29, 2005, marks the date of the worst flood in U.S. history. Most people name this event Hurricane Katrina, but the fact is Katrina itself was not responsible for the devastation in New Orleans. Inadequate levies were the cause of these devastating flood waters. All who witnessed the rising, rushing water fill the city first hand or

the aftermath a few weeks later have a new understanding and respect for water.

The TV accounts of the flood in those first few hours could only cover the destruction of property and life. The real devastation in those first few days of the flood was the loss of family. As time and days moved on, the devastation was loss of community, friends, and livelihood. Water had caused the separation of family members, displaced neighbors, parishioners, schoolmates, and coworkers and friends and left people without the means to survive. Many family members, friends, and neighbors have been reunited. Some were never found, and some will never be reconnected or reunited. The loss of people through displacement and distance is hard for the non-natives who became part of the New Orleans' community. Our lack of financial or family ties to the city and our unwelcome need to live elsewhere have created feelings of hopelessness in returning and reconnecting.

As a non-native who was privileged to "move on" away from the everyday presence of devastation, the loss is different but painful. Living without the presence of those who surrounded me daily or the folks I looked forward to seeing in the market places and in church is my devastation. Most people plan a move away from family, friends, or a city. Most people have the option of a farewell party, or how and if they want to say goodbye. Even if one left in a hurry, often there's a chance to return to familiar faces and places. My stolen chance to say goodbye and the impossible task of locating familiar faces created a hole that only time can fill.

The threat of storms will forever cause me to think of the children in New Orleans who cry each time it rains and of the community I loved. I pray that those affected by storm waters will someday soon remember the romantic water thoughts they once had.

*Story by:  
Patricia Rogers, OP*



**Ruben and Sandra Blancas welcomed Sr. Patricia Rogers and co-workers into their home during Hurricane Katrina. Front, center: Ruben with grandson, Alex. Back, from leRuben and Sandra Blancas welcomed Sr. Patricia Rogers and co-workers into their home during Hurricane Katrina. Front, center: Ruben with grandson, Alex. Back, from left: Sr. Cynthia Marie, Sr. Maria Consilia, Sr. Patricia Rogers, Sandra, Monica holding Mya, and Sr. Marie Antoinette, and Sr. Jennie Jones.**

**This is all that remains of a lot where a house in the Lower Ninth Ward once stood. This area was the hardest hit by the flood waters. In January 2007 there were few signs of rebuilding efforts in this area.**



## Adrian Dominican Sisters Assist Friars

*(The Adrian Dominican Sisters, through the generosity of their prioress, Sr. Donna Markham, OP, have been a visible and lively presence in the New Orleans area. They are here assisting the Eucharistic Missionaries, the St. Mary's Dominicans, the friars of the Southern Province and the people of New Orleans. They have volunteered their time and energy to help in any way they are needed.)*

There is a time and a season for everything, says Ecclesiastes. And the image of seasons has deep resonance for Sr. Mary Ann Caulfield, OP. Caulfield is one of several sisters from the Adrian Dominican Congregation who has come to New Orleans recently to assist in the recovery efforts and ministry of the Southern Province. Sr. Mary Ann says that in her time here she sees the people experiencing the seasons of life - sometimes they experience dryness and difficulty of winter, other times it's the newness, growth and hope of summer.

Sr. Mary Ann has been missioned to Xavier University of Louisiana to work in Campus Ministry with Jeffery Ott (Chaplain) and the campus ministry staff. She ministers to the needs of the faculty by being a

pastoral presence in a time of great chaos and upheaval in their lives. "I wanted to share my gifts of listening and emotional support," says Caulfield, who is still on sabbatical after being Chapter Prioress for six years. "I thought I could be of some assistance, especially since I lived in nearby Slidell and worked in education there."

Other Adrian sisters are working with the friars in their various ministries. Srs. Margaret Lane, OP and Marilyn Uline, OP are ministering with the friars at St. Thomas More Parish at Tulane University. Srs. Carol Johannes, OP and Celine Regan, OP work in the community of St. Dominic Parish. Not only here to assist the friars, Sr. Carol Louise Hiller, OP serves the community at St. Mary's Dominican High School. Sr. Joan Mary serves the elderly residents, including retired priests and religious at Chateau de Notre Dame. At St. Maria Goretti, a parish in New Orleans East, Srs. Eileen Meyers, OP, Noreen O'Connell, OP and Mary Elizabeth Crimmins, OP minister with the Sisters from the Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic in a door-to-door effort to support the people who are rebuilding in the area.

In the outpouring of help to New Orleans, Sr. Donna Markham, OP, Prioress of the Adrian Dominican Sisters, sent a letter to the whole

congregation asking for sisters to help the Dominican Family and the people of New Orleans. There was a great response to the call, says Sr. Kathy Nolan, OP, Councilor of the congregation who was asked to mission or send the sisters to various OP ministries in the City. "The sisters really want to be here," said Nolan. "All of them are very gifted women who bring a diverse set of skills and abilities from their years of ministry."

The sisters have found their time in New Orleans to be a blessing. "It's amazing to see the people here at Xavier," says Sr. Mary Ann. "They have been overwhelmingly open and gracious with their hospitality." Among the things that have impressed Caulfield the most is the faith of the people here. "These people are living that faith to the fullest in order to get through it. They need God who is greater than all the heartache and tragedy they are going through, otherwise they wouldn't make it," she says.

"It's the faith of the people that keep this City alive," said Caulfield. "And this is a time for me of reverencing their lives and their witness."

*Story by:*

*Jeff Ott, OP (St. Martin)*



## *New Orleans -- After the Storm*

