

...my other neighbors. They are young. They always invite us over when they barbecue and always put up our garbage cans when the workers leave them in the street. And when the workers are laying out the new ones, they always return the favor. Every time I come home from school, I see the children at the sweetshop getting impatient, because the old lady is taking too long to answer the door, and the rest of them are playing football in front of the church, trying to catch the ball and pull their pants up at the same time. I love the innocence I see in the little girls playing double-dutch with their white bows in their hair. Sometimes I want so badly to say, "Can I have a turn?" But the other part of me says, "Girl, don't interrupt those children."



CENTER *for*
COMMUNITY CHANGE

DISMANTLING a Community

A lot of people were finally looking at our school as more than just a place where criminals are reared, which is the impression you'd get if all you knew were news reports. The media came to the school to report a fight, but no one said anything when my classmates placed first in a competition against professional journalists for a series they wrote on public education. But for folks who knew what we were doing and spent time with us, you could see them actually smiling when Douglass was named.

Acknowledgements

IN AUGUST OF 2004, the Center for Community Change's "Education Team," developed an issue of its quarterly newsletter, *Education Organizing*, around the writings of 8 New Orleans high school students who were part of Students at the Center (SAC). [The issue is available at our website, http://www.communitychange.org/issues/education/publications/downloads/edorg17_fall2004.pdf]. It was our first contact with Students at the Center.

As we watched the unfolding horror of Hurricane Katrina's impact, we began to wonder what had happened to those students and their schools. We managed to find Jim Randels, one of the founders of Students at the Center and a teacher and parent in the New Orleans Public Schools. He was in South Carolina, and he was trying to locate his former students. Jim offered to help us collect writings about the storm, and students' hopes for the rebuilding their schools. Soon, essays started arriving from Tulsa, Atlanta and other cities where the displaced students were living temporarily. At the time, the essays seemed to carry widely differing messages and stories, and we weren't sure how to pull them together for a new edition of our newsletter.

But then we began to hear stories about what was happening on the ground in New Orleans: that the teachers union had been virtually destroyed; that the federal government was heavily supporting

the establishment of charter schools in the city, at the expense of a centralized public structure. We began to track and monitor these developments. When, in the early summer of 2006, we went back to the students' writings, it was suddenly clear that the thread that tied the essays together was the sense of community that they shared. It seemed in such contrast to what was happening on the ground in New Orleans that we decided to super-impose the student writings on a fairly straightforward and factual chronology of the dismantling of the New Orleans Public Schools.

Thanks goes first and foremost to the five former SAC students and two New Orleans Public School teachers whose essays are included here, and to others who provided writings that we weren't able to fit in. These folks have shared their hearts with us, as well as their gifts for both perspective and hope. Jim Randels and his colleagues at Students at the Center helped gather writings, photographs and stories. Lance Hill, executive director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane University helped dig up dates and contacts and provided a steady dose of outrage to keep us going.

As the publication came together, CCC staff LaDon James and Lynn Kanter and intern Maria Roeper provided suggestions and research help. Outside readers Michael Charney, Cris Doby, Adriane Frazier, Barbara Leckie and Deborah Menkart provided valuable

suggestions and encouragement. All that said, however, primary authorship and full responsibility for this publication rests with Leigh Dingerson, director of the Center's "Education Team."

It was no easy task to create a design that made sense of this story. Our design and layout were developed by GO! Creative in Kensington, Maryland.

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Introduction

In late August, 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed in to the Gulf coast. Among its many casualties, the storm shattered the New Orleans public school system. Over half of the city's school buildings were destroyed. Tens of thousands of students and teachers fled across the country to find shelter, jobs and an education. Most of them have yet to return.

But Katrina was just the beginning of a much more fundamental “end” to the New Orleans Public Schools.

In the immediate chaos after the storm, many both in and outside New Orleans – people who were not searching for relatives, who had dry shoes and a place to lay their heads – seized on the disaster as an “opportunity.”

It was a chilling concept when so many were still suffering. But just over a year ago, the city of New Orleans was home to what was inarguably one of the worse school systems in the country. Mostly low-income, virtually all Black, under-resourced and often miserably managed, the New Orleans Public Schools struggled to serve the city's children equitably and well. There

were bright spots, to be sure. But like other urban school systems across the country, it was the struggles, not the triumphs that dominated public perceptions. In that familiar climate, the voices of warning over how the “opportunity” would be answered, were muted and dismissed.

Over the past twelve months, buoyed by the support of the federal government, a network of conservative anti-government activists have moved with singular intensity to patch together a new vision for K–12 education that they hope will become a national model.

It is a vision that disdains the public sector and those who work within it. It is a vision based on competition and economic markets. It is a vision of private hands spending public funds.

Most disturbing, it is a vision that casts families and students as “customers,” who shop for schools in isolation from – and even in competition



with – their neighbors. It is a vision that, like the game of musical chairs, requires someone to be left without a seat.

This publication focuses on the rush to implement that vision, and on what we lose when we discard the old paradigm of a centralized, universal-access system of public schools. Our story is told in two parts. The story of the opportunistic “educational land-

My education isn't just for me. It is also for my fellow students.

—Maria Hernandez

grab,” (as teacher Jim Randels refers to it) is told through a chronology that begins just before the hurricane, and ends with the opening of school in the fall of 2006 – one year later.

The second story – that of the value of a system of common schools – is told by former students and teachers. They are part of “Students at the

who share that space. Public education in the U.S. is *not* only about academic achievement or job-preparedness. Public schools bring together races and cultures, learning styles and learning struggles, interests and talents and skills that make them what they are meant to be: rich experiences where the whole national mosaic of

of those schools that separate and destroy the potential of community,” It is that potential that is in danger of being destroyed.

As school opens this fall, families in New Orleans are faced with dozens of largely independent schools, each with its own enrollment process and requirements, start date, and instructional program. Public dollars – including millions in federal monies – have been transferred to these entities without centralized oversight. In its design, and indeed in its early operation, this network of independent schools has functioned like a sieve; sifting, separating and disbursing children and families. Below it are the now state-run schools that promise to catch all those who fail to find a seat when the sorting stops.

It’s the wrong way to go, say the authors of the essays included here. “*You can’t be a community by yourself,*” concludes Ashley Jones.

This story is set in New Orleans. But it is not unique to that city: Our hope is that public education activists across the country will recognize the trend towards the decentralization and privatization of schools in their own districts, and will resonate with these voices of young people calling for the restoration of community. ●

It is a vision that casts families and students as “customers” who shop for schools in isolation from – and even in competition with – their neighbors. Like the game of musical chairs, it requires someone to be left without a seat.

Center,” a writing program based in the New Orleans public schools. The program teaches students to express themselves, and to value and engage in their communities.

Programs like Students at the Center embody what’s best about public schools – dedicated teachers putting in extra hours to connect with children, and bright and engaged students who rise confidently out of the sometimes crumbling hallways and classrooms and *insist* that their community rise with them.

Community, in this context, is not physical space. It is about the people

humanity develops a sense of *collective engagement*, and interdependence. Academic achievement is vital, of course. But *there is something more*. Katrina exposed deep roots of racism and class tensions in The Big Easy, perhaps none as visible as those that under girded and mired down the New Orleans Public Schools. Yet inside those buildings, there were important life lessons being taught.

The young people of Students at the Center know it. And they know its value. “*There is only one way to eliminate low-performing schools for good,*” writes Ashley Jones; “*get rid*



Students at the Center (SAC)

Students at the Center (SAC) is an independent program that has been offered in the Orleans Parish public schools since 1996. The students of SAC participate through an elective writing course within their schools. The program operates under three basic principles:

- ◆ Students are a *resource* to, and not just an object of the education process;
- ◆ Education is for *community* development in addition to individual student development, and
- ◆ The campus is the community.

Through Students at the Center, middle- and high school students find their unique voices through work as writers, journalists and creative artists. They participate in peer teaching; working with younger students to help improve their writing skills. They also publish a city-wide teen newspaper, produce small chapbooks and make videos addressing teen concerns. Some serve on community advisory boards and work as mentors in school and after-school programs.

The classroom setting gives SAC students the opportunity to train for and reflect upon their work, to develop in a group rather than an individual setting, and to benefit from daily contact with an adult mentor/teacher.

Students at the Center was originally based at two New Orleans schools. Frederick Douglass High School, located in the now-infamous Ninth Ward, was widely known as the lowest-performing high school in the state. A few blocks away, Students at the Center also had a base at McDonogh #35, a “selective admission” high school that attracted some of the best and brightest students in New Orleans.

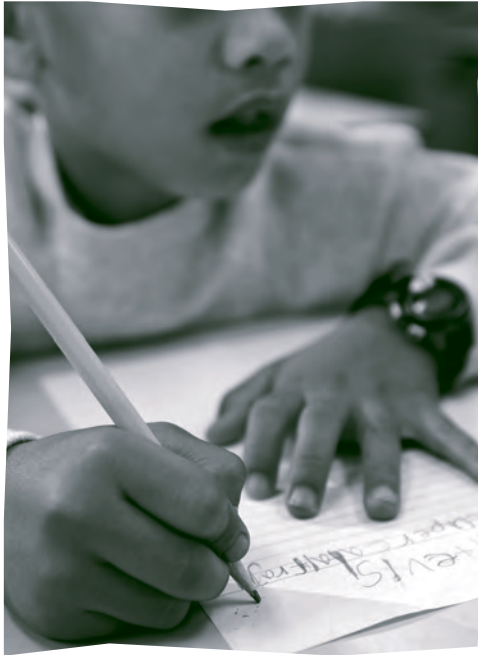
Many SAC participants, including those whose work is reflected in this publication, have gone on to college, and many have returned to New Orleans to teach, and to remain a part of Students at the Center. ●

*In order to improve New Orleans schools we must break from helping **some** get a good education to help **everyone** get a good education.*

—Christopher Burton



Dismantling a Community



New Orleans Public Schools

Schools: 117

Students: 63,000

% African American: 93

% low-income: 75

Spring, 2005

The New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) is a struggling district of 63,000 students. The district's student population has been decreasing over the past decade. Most of the city's white families have retreated to neighboring parishes or put their children in private schools. Middle class and professional African American families rely heavily on the city's many Catholic schools. Drained of this middle-class constituency, and the political support that it provided, the New Orleans Public Schools are spiraling downward. Year after year, attempts to increase local funding for the schools fail to gain support in citywide elections. Year after year, the bountiful profits of the New Orleans tourist industry and the oil and gas resources that have lined corporate pockets and federal coffers so handsomely, fail to find their way into the city's education system.

Mismanagement and infighting on the Orleans Parish School Board feed the perception that the system is broken beyond repair.

But "beyond repair" is *not* the perception of many of the district's teachers, who commit year after year to working in some of the city's most troubled schools, like Frederick Douglass High School in the Ninth Ward.

Teachers at Douglass have created Students at the Center, an elective writing course that serves as a sanctuary for small groups of students at Douglass (and other schools) each year. In Students at the Center, young people are encouraged to find their voices, develop their writing skills and engage in their communities. Along with teacher Jim Randels, several of the students have joined the Douglass Community Coalition to involve residents of the Ninth Ward in supporting Douglass, and to engage students at Douglass in community organizing efforts.

These socially active teachers, and thousands of other employees of the New Orleans Public Schools, are members of AFT Local 527, the United Teachers of New Orleans [UTNO]. The union has a long history of progressive activism and political action.¹

As the summer of 2005 winds down, students, teachers and parents prepare for another school year.

Louisiana, My Home

By Keva Carr

I appreciate my neighborhood for its quietness, but sometimes it can get out of hand. I live right across the street from the police station, and all day long I hear sirens, which always give me a reason to believe they are just doing it for the hell of it. I see the police at night too, riding on their bikes with their high shorts on saying good night. And when it's dark in the sky, the stars shine so bright and so beautiful that sometimes I sit on my porch and hope for a shooting star, knowing one will never come.

Everyone in my neighborhood doesn't watch your back or anything. I guess they're too busy dealing with their own crazy agendas. Ms. Ella Rose, who's lived there since I have, lives in a double house next to her daughter and grandchild. Ms. Ella Rose is nice, well when she wants to be. It's like she has two personalities. She speaks one day, and when she and the rest of the old ladies sit and rock on the porch, I think they talk about everybody. Her daughter Cheryl is the same way. She has a cat for a daughter. Sneaky as the day is long. I often wonder if she knows her daughter has an exposed reputation or dislikes me because every now and then I get harassed by the boys who work at the rental service parallel to my house. 19, 20, and 21 year-olds wasting their time hoping to catch a glimpse of me walking in or out of my house.

I like my other neighbors. They are young. They always invite us over when they barbecue and stuff and always put up our garbage cans when the workers leave them in the street. And

when theirs are laying out, we always return the favor. Every time I come from school, I see the children at the sweetshop getting impatient, because the old lady is taking too long to answer the door and the rest of them are playing football in front of the church, trying to catch the ball and pull their pants up at the same time. I love the innocence I see in the little girls playing double-dutch with their white bows in their hair. Sometimes I want so badly to say, "Can I have a turn?" But the other part of me says, "Girl, don't interrupt those children."

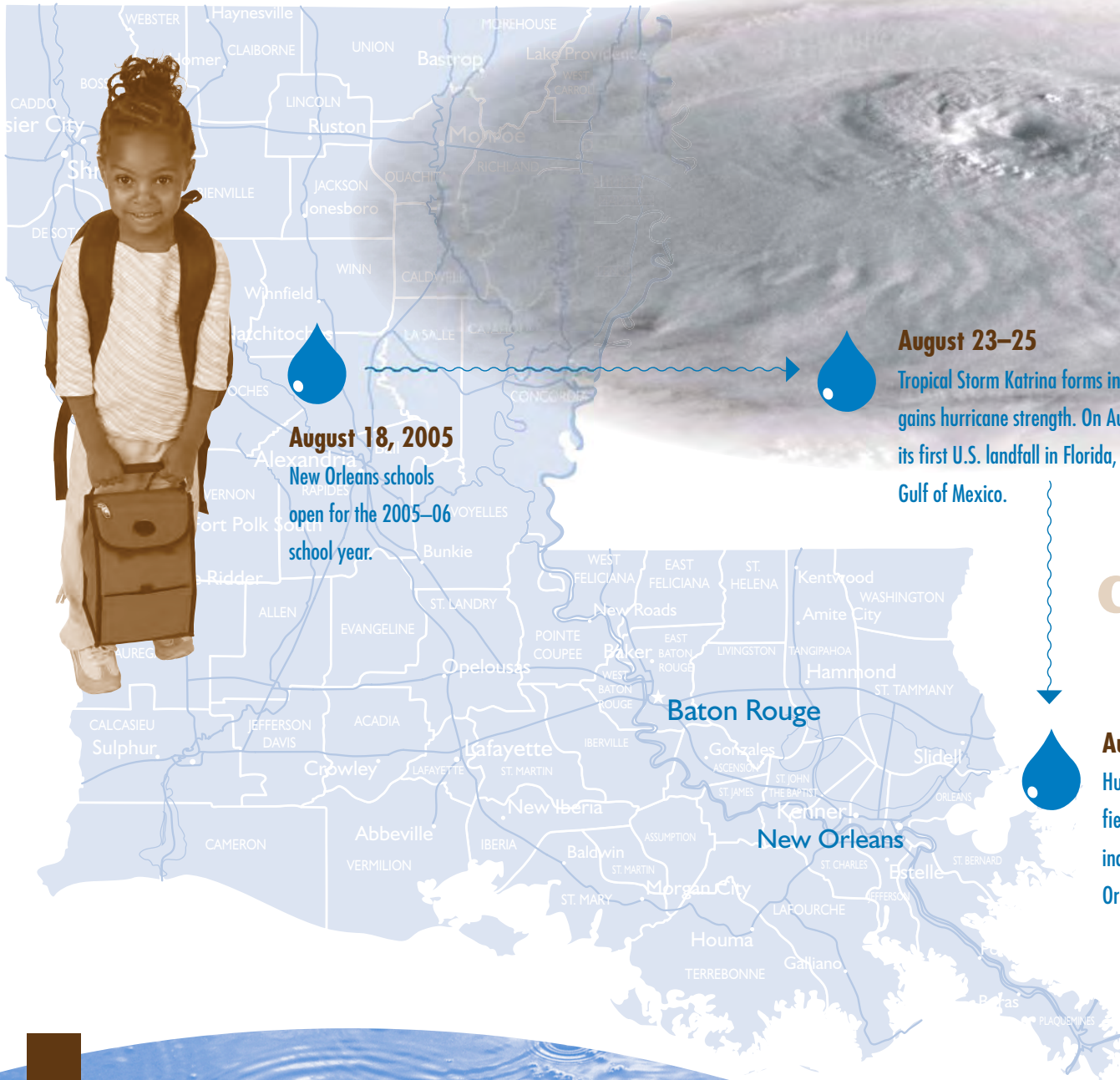
Seventeen years I lived in my neighborhood, and recently I lived through gun shots going off and my mother's tears of fear. When I heard them, I knew it had to be the small house on the corner where all the boys linger around for only one thing. But I love passing through that block just to see Ms. Harrison's beautiful flowers blooming in the sun, and I always say I'm going to make me some roses, but never do. I love when it rains in my neighborhood. My porch is made just right, so I can stand on my red stairs and let the rain just fall on my face. The rain hits the grass that everyone keeps cut, and when it gets dark, the big trees look like giants in the night.

If my streets could talk, I wonder what they would whisper besides the pain as we trample over them. If they could listen, I wonder would they be able to experience the quietness or the chaos behind it. ●



PHOTO BY HUGHES JONES

The rain hits the grass that everyone keeps cut, and when it gets dark, the big trees look like giants in the night.



August 18, 2005
New Orleans schools
open for the 2005–06
school year.

August 23–25
Tropical Storm Katrina forms in the Caribbean and quickly gains hurricane strength. On August 25th the storm makes its first U.S. landfall in Florida, before heading into the Gulf of Mexico.

CATEGORY 5

August 26
Hurricane Katrina reaches “Category 5” status as one of the fiercest hurricanes ever to approach the U.S. The massive storm inches north across the Gulf. Evacuation orders are issued for New Orleans and surrounding coastal areas.

First Day

By Maria Hernandez

For the first time in almost four years I'm early. I can usually walk right up to the metal detectors, but today is the first day of school. At 8:05 the line is longer than the line at the welfare office.

Rodneka, a fellow senior, bounces my way, her 5-inch dreads waving along with her smile. "Girl, you must be excited for school. You usually duck into 1st period two seconds after the tardy bell, and that's early for you."

She's right; I'm busted. If I lived just for me, I'd be strolling in around lunchtime, well rested from a long night of listening to music and writing poems and stories. But this year is different, really different. This year my lil bro and lil sis are freshmen at Douglass High School. And I had to work hard to get them in our neighborhood school.

That sounds funny to me. I mean, there's no test to get into Douglass. No parent contract. No grade point requirement. That's how it is at all the "good" schools in New Orleans: The schools where most of the kids in my neighborhood go if they've done at all well in middle school. Douglass takes on the students no one else really wants to educate.

Working hard to get Johnny and Sonia into Douglass meant convincing my mom and my aunts and uncles that Douglass, this school that the state labels "academically unacceptable," is a really good place to learn.

On this steaming August day, surrounded by the buzz of excited conversation, sweaty foreheads and eager faces, I'm glad to be bringing my siblings to our neighborhood school rather than running away from it. And for their sake and the sake of all the other 9th graders, it's important for me to be on time.

One reason I'm on time and at Douglass is because of the history I'm studying. In New Orleans, many enslaved Africans escaped plantations but stayed in the area. These maroons knew, like Frederick Douglass knew, that none of us can be free unless all of our people are free. My education isn't just for me. It is also for my fellow students.

My reasons for being at Douglass and being on time hit me hard in my fourth period. There

I'm learning what it is to be a senior and a mentor in the Students at the Center, or SAC, program. This writing for the community class has 14 freshmen and sophomores. Another SAC veteran and I are the 15th and 16th class members. Don't get me wrong; we didn't fail the writing class before. It's just our turn to help younger students learn how to write and to talk about writing and to develop into leaders.

Ashley Jones, a SAC graduate, now works with SAC. She told me on the 2nd day of school, "Maria, your day has come. Everyone at Douglass is looking up to you." I just didn't expect that day to come so soon, but you know what, I'm ready – and on time. ●

August 26, 2005

On this steaming August day, surrounded by the buzz of excited conversation, sweaty foreheads and eager faces, I'm glad to be bringing my siblings to our neighborhood school rather than running away from it.



Displaced and Destroyed

- ◆ 63,000 public school students
- ◆ 12,000 teachers (25% of the workforce) in the New Orleans area, nearly 4,500 of them from Orleans parish.
- ◆ Over half the city's 117 school buildings are damaged beyond repair.

9 days after the storm...

The Heritage Foundation outlines its recommendations for the rebuilding of New Orleans:

- ◆ "In general, tools such as tax credits and voucher programs, which allow individuals and families to direct funds, should be utilized to encourage private sector innovation and sensitivity to individual needs and preferences."
- ◆ "Private vision, not bureaucracy, must be the engine to rebuild... The critical need now is to encourage investors and entrepreneurs to seek new opportunities within these cities. Bureaucrats cannot do that..."³

Conservative think-tanks, business interests and pro-charter organizations were quick and decisive in articulating their anti-government agenda for moving forward in New Orleans.

August 29

Hurricane Katrina slams in to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Levees fail to hold back the storm surge rising in Lake Ponchartrain, and the Industrial Canal that bisects the city's Ninth Ward as it connects the Lake to the Mississippi River. Vast sections of the city, particularly the low-lying and predominantly African American Ninth Ward are flooded with as much as 30 feet of water.

The city's "Lower Ninth," to the east of the canal and already isolated from the rest of the city, is particularly hard hit. Hundreds of mostly low-income African Americans who could not afford to evacuate ahead of the storm, drown in the flood waters.

Some of the city's more white and wealthy neighborhoods, like the famous Garden District, and the French Quarter, rest on higher ground. They are largely spared from the flooding.

In Washington and Baton Rouge, while the federal government bungles its response to Katrina, conservative education groups and the "education industry" lobby (the Education Industry Association represents corporations that market goods to school systems – textbooks, assessments, tutoring services – and also includes major corporate operators of public schools) are ready with a unified message: This is an "opportunity" to create a new paradigm of publicly funded, market-based schools that provide "flexibility" for individual families. They begin lobbying heavily in Baton Rouge, and hold private meetings in Washington with federal education secretary Margaret Spellings.

This influential interest group is also quick to dominate the media. Their message is simple: Those who call for rebuilding a centralized public school infrastructure are "defenders of the status quo."² Either you think the schools were working for everyone, or you agree that the whole system, and the people who worked in it, must be scrapped. It is an insidious and pervasive message.

To: My City

By Keva Carr

New Orleans was more than a city; it was my home.

All my life I lived in New Orleans. Now my memories are all washed away, floating with the dead bodies that couldn't ride out Katrina.

Then came [Hurricane] Rita saying, "Kick them while they're down."

From August 28 on, while sitting at my little desk in Sabine Hall at Northwestern State University, my eyes were glued to the news every minute I could. Every second I could get away to watch it, I did. I sat there moving my lips over and over, and they were starting to make a song:

"It always went past us; it always went past us."

But my broken record of a song couldn't repair my house or the other hundreds that went under all over the world. I've been sheltered all my life, and spoiled, never had to ask for anything. I could call on my aunt, grandmother, or mom, and they'd be anywhere I needed them at the drop of a hat. But now what was I to do? They were miles away, trying to fight off something that they couldn't stop. There was a point where I did not know whether they were okay or not. I spent lots of time calling my mother's cell, only to receive her voicemail over and over again.

As I watched the news, my eyes became a waterfall, and the waterfall wouldn't stop. It just

got full until it made several individual puddles of waterfalls on my small desk. I saw that New Orleans residents had nothing, nothing but their lives. And as we were exploited on NBC, CNN, etc. I saw that they were fighting for that. How could a heart be so cold? How could a soul be so black? How can someone see people in a need of help and just do nothing? I stared so hard at the television as if I could change it. As though I was the president, and with my hard staring eyes I could change everything.

I rubbed my hands together, and I started to write this. One thing was going through my head, and it was the thought of this piece reaching thousands of people. Everyone's saying that all the things we have lost are material. They can be replaced. We should be thankful for our lives. We should, and I am, but it's still going to be so hard after so much we have worked for.

New Orleans helped make this girl you see before you. This summer, when we moved to Chalmette, in St. Bernard Parish, I thought I'd never look back. Well I didn't want to. I was tired of seeing the same old crooked things on my block, and I was ready for our move.

Why am I looking back now? Well, when a

friend is in trouble, you do not turn your back on her. But in my case it's a city. A city that has given me laughter and tears. New Orleans has given me my education. I'm not saying that my city meant nothing to me before. It's just that I treasure it more now than ever. Because desperate times calls for desperate measures. Because my city needs me. It needs my prayers, my hope, my words and my strength. My city can recover, and so will the people in it. New Orleans was more than a city; it was my home.

So to New Orleans I say, "Hold your head up. Although the people of my city may ask why, don't lose hope. Although you might say, 'what is there to believe in?' Hold your head up for your family, your children, and believe in you."

To: My city

I love you, and you

Shall

Rise

Again. ●



CHARTER SCHOOLS

September 14

Quickly joining the dismantling bandwagon is federal Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. In a letter to state school chiefs, Spellings calls charter schools “uniquely equipped” to serve students displaced by Katrina, and announces that she will waive some federal restrictions on charter schools in order to help new schools in New Orleans get up and running.⁴

September 15

The Orleans Parish School Board, convening (in Baton Rouge) for the first time since the storm, votes to place the district’s 7,500 school employees, including 4,500 teachers along with cafeteria workers, custodians, and school nurses on “Disaster Leave” without pay.

Also at this meeting, Board quickly approves an application to establish the Lusher Charter School. Lusher is an existing K–5 public school that largely serves students of professors at nearby Tulane University. Charter status allows Lusher parents to establish admissions criteria for their school, disengage the teaching staff from the union contract, and direct the school’s curriculum and finances independent of the city school system.

September 30

Secretary Spellings announces a U.S. Department of Education grant of \$20.9 million to Louisiana for the establishment and opening of charter schools.



12 days after the storm...

The Education Industry Association, which represents corporate interests like textbook companies and corporate school contractors, sends a letter to its members:

“Defining moments in history are often recognized with aid of hindsight. Looking backward in time, events and opportunities always come into sharper focus. The challenge is to see these moments in real time and to act decisively. Katrina, and her swath of destruction, can be one of these defining moments in the history of the education industry. Our actions or inactions will leave an indelible mark in the minds of our customers, including students, families and schools; the media, and elected officials...”⁵



After the Storm

By Ashley Jones

Riding in the back seat of a packed car, watching the trees and birds and the sky whiz by me like the snapshots one sees before dying, I begin to think about life after this storm. We've been through them before, most of the time preferring to huddle together on the living room floor around dancing candlelight, and sleep it off. However, we knew this one was going to be impossible to slumber through. We had to leave.

Before I could think about the man I called Cookie Monster, whose auto parts store was on the corner of the block I grew up on in Pigeon Town or the shop on Leondias where I first got my hair straight-combed, I thought about them. Their faces come back to me like a favorite song forgotten or an old lover's face. Their laughter echoes in my mind, and I see their grinning teeth, shining in spite of their mournful eyes, eyes that tell the truth about the pain and confusion in their lives. Their giggles strangle and stifle cries of hopelessness.

Before I thought about the place I used to get my chicken sandwiches from on Freret St. or Ms. Sadie the iceberg lady right off of LaSalle St in the 3rd, I saw Maria and Rodneka, Earlnika, Keve, and Daniel. I thought about Douglass High School and the gloomy hallways that always made me feel that I was in a scary movie or something. I wondered what would be next for them, no longer having Students at the Center (SAC). I

thought about the schools they may be forced to go to, those cold, stiff rooms where the real world never becomes part of the lesson plan. Where kids like me and nameless others grow irritated when we think of the real world waiting to suck us up in a vortex just right outside.

*I could think about the man
I called Cookie Monster,
whose auto parts store was
**on the corner of the
block I grew up on in
Pigeon Town or the shop on
Leondias where I first got
my hair straight-combed.***



Revisiting the halls of Douglas in my mind, I never knew how much these kids meant to me. And although I have always been grateful to SAC, I finally realize the saving grace it has been. So many times I've walked these dusky halls and felt that I had just entered the walls of an abandoned ship stacked high with forgotten treasure. I size up the bounty of pliable, young bodies and make note of the exuberant brilliance of their eyes and their hair and their mouths, and I think, "Why hasn't anyone claimed this treasure, this fountain of youth, this elixir of life!?"

I watch these students watch me skip through the halls, and I wonder if they know how much like them I am. I wonder if they can see the confused and hostile child tucked away behind the ruffles of my bohemian skirts. Maybe when they look into my eyes, they come face to face with a young person once so afraid of my own power that I refused to read pieces in class and spent many nights dreading the next day. More than seeing me as a college graduate or the quiet girl with the camera skills, I want them to see my transformation and the roles they, along with SAC play in my continuing growth.

We drove and drove that August day, ahead of the storm. But my head never left my home. ●



WWW.LINCOLNPHOTO.COM

*“Katrina, in its devastation really gives the **opportunity** for a rebirth of a school district.”⁶*

—Leslie R. Jacobs, member, Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

As New Orleans begins to collect itself, Mayor Ray Nagin creates the “Bring New Orleans Back Commission” to guide redevelopment and rebuilding. The Commission’s Education Committee is heavily populated by charter proponents and national education activists. There are no seats on the committee designated for representatives of parents or teachers from the New Orleans Public Schools.

Over the next three months the committee holds a series of public hearings, including hearings in cities like Atlanta and Houston, where thousands of evacuees have landed. The commission also consults with other school districts around the country, looks at what’s working and what isn’t in public education. But while this deliberative process is underway, other interests are moving swiftly ahead. The Bring New Orleans Back education committee’s final report is not released until January, 2006.

October, 2005

The near total evacuation of New Orleans, and the storm damage that makes much of the city uninhabitable, decimates the already inadequate primary source of funding for the New Orleans public schools – the local property tax.

Local property, however, is not emerging from the flood waters at the same pace. Low-income African Americans from the Ninth Ward see little hope of being able to return to their homes for months – if ever. But middle class and upper class neighborhoods are largely intact, and so the early faces returning to New Orleans are largely white and middle class. A debate opens up around how, or even *whether* to rebuild all of New Orleans. Some are quite blunt in their promotion of a plan that would restore *only* the middle-class or predominantly white neighborhoods.

Proposals of all sorts emerge. But none gathers enough support to move forward. In the void created by this inertia, the free-market “reformers” continue to move rapidly and decisively, at least when it comes to the schools.

The neighborhoods of Gentilly, East New Orleans and the Ninth Ward are among the poorest in the city. But they also are home to many middle-class African American families. The members of United Teachers of New Orleans – the single largest group of Black, college-educated homeowners in New Orleans – are among those displaced by the devastating storm.



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October 7

The Orleans Parish School Board votes 4-2 to convert all 13 schools in the Algiers community on the west bank of the Mississippi River to charter schools.⁸ These are to be “open admission” schools (with no academic criteria or neighborhood boundaries guiding enrollment). But because they are charter schools, they are permitted to establish a limit on the size of their student body. Unlike regular public schools, they are not required to admit anyone once they reach their stated capacity. The application specifically states that employees of the Algiers Charter School District cannot be members of the teachers union or considered employees of the New Orleans Public Schools.⁹

Simultaneously, Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco issues an executive order waiving key portions of the state’s charter school law to make conversion and creation of charters easier. One of the provisions that is waived is a requirement that the conversion of a traditional public school to a charter be conditioned on the approval of a school’s faculty and parents.¹⁰

Following the Board vote, an African American pastor in Algiers files a lawsuit against the new charter district, demanding a public and transparent debate over whether the proposal is necessary and in the best interests of the community.

“In the case of post-hurricane New Orleans, American school planners will be as close as they have ever come to a ‘green field’ opportunity.”

—Paul T. Hill, *Center on Reinventing Public Education*⁷

Honoring Community

By Ashley Jones

In the summer of 2005 I had the rare privilege to see an ancient community working together to make themselves stronger. In this community – where people sit in a circle on the floor – there were expert hunters, farmers, and medicine men. Each person had a skill to share, and in the event that the medicine man was absent, people did not die, because everyone was taught the healing properties of certain herbs and plants.



This ancient community was part of a play by students from Fredrick Douglass and Chalmette High Schools, both schools in neighborhoods severely devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Chalmette, a predominantly White high school, is in St. Bernard Parish, just across the parish line from Douglass, the all-black New Orleans public school where I was working. As part of the State of the Nation program, a project of the Douglass Community Coalition led by coalition member Artspot Productions, these students dealt with the problem of the inequities of public education, specifically starting with the New Orleans public school system.

In the six weeks that we convened to create this play, a group of black and white students

– who wouldn't otherwise be affiliated with each other – became a community. I've seen them with my own eyes, learning from each other's strengths, and each one growing stronger. As much as it made me happy to see this utopia of learning and understanding and community development, it was also heart crushing. Because in the real world – a world where the individual is more important than the group – this type of community learning would not be awaiting them at their respective schools, unless they were able to be a part of a program such as Students at the Center (SAC), a school-based writing program that links community to school and develops youth voices and leadership.

There are few other programs that encourage students to learn through their own experiences, which means that everyone can be a teacher in his or her own way. How well you do in the class is not dependent on your grades or whether or not you can pass a test, but on how well you can connect your experiences to the current events, policies and decisions that affect your life. SAC equips students with the ability to be leaders in their own schools and communities.

In the wake of hurricane Katrina, the students from Chalmette and Douglass high schools have both suffered devastating losses to their communities. The good thing is that all of us who care about New Orleans and the surrounding parishes have the opportunity to

learn from the SAC community. We can make our school system reflect true equality and community cooperation that could generate significant economic and technological growth as well as great self-reliance and -sufficiency.

One of the first and most critical steps to having a public school system that works for each student is to break down the barriers that divide communities. These barriers include selective admissions schools that have the ability to design their student body based on admissions test scores or simply self-selection by students, their families, and their teachers.

Separating students who can achieve on certain levels from those who may not be able to achieve on those levels hurts and weakens all students.

Separating students who can achieve on certain levels from those who may not be able to achieve on those levels hurts and weakens all students. Instead of creating a system that allows students from the same neighborhood with varying degrees of knowledge to learn and help each other be better students, these selective

admission schools rip vital human resources from their own communities while discriminating against others. But these "others" are also vital human resources.

I experienced this issue firsthand as a student at McDonogh #35, a selective admissions school. Yet my relatives and friends in my own community attended Carver, Booker T. Washington, and Douglass High Schools, all of which are considered low-performing schools. Although I didn't initially understand some of my family's resentment of the high school I chose to attend, somehow I did feel like I was a part of the abandonment of not just those in my family but in my community. I understood that my education was somewhat better than theirs, but why? Whenever I walked into my cousin Eddie's room when he was doing homework, he would stop immediately and throw his books aside. I knew he was having trouble, because his mother told me so. Even though we were cousins, for some strange reason the fact that he attended Carver, a "low performing school" and I McDonogh # 35, made it hard for him to come to me for help even when I was clearly offering my services.

Imagine if all of the medicine men, all of the hunters, musicians and farmers decided to create their own communities, excluding or rarely dealing with those with other skills? They would notice that their communities would become gravely destitute as musicians realize they know nothing about hunting, the hunters can't heal the sick, and the medicine men starve to death because they know not how to cook. The ancients understood one thing we fail to realize:



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LEWIS

you can't be a community by yourself. And even if you find a group of people who are just as smart as you, or can play an instrument just as fine as you can, there are skills that the group lacks and desperately needs.

If we are serious about creating a better New Orleans and we understand that a better school system is an important factor in that, then we know what we have to do. There is only one way to eliminate low-performing schools for

good: Get rid of those schools that separate and destroy the potential of community.

The vision that we created through the State of the Nation play last summer was a vision of community. So when a student is trying to decide whether to attend Easton or Douglass, the determining factor should be as frivolous as liking the color of the uniform. It should not be a choice to abandon your whole community to better yourself. ●



October 14

A civil court judge in New Orleans orders the school board to stop its plans for a charter district in Algiers, agreeing that the Board acted without providing the opportunity for public comment, as required.

“It is in this time of crisis, when the citizens of Orleans Parish are concerned about the very future of their communities, that the role of public input is crucial. The people of New Orleans are entitled to participate in the process that will potentially change the landscape of their public educational system

—Judge Nadine M. Ramsey¹¹



October 28

The Orleans Parish School Board meets again and takes several steps:

- ◆ Having complied with the requirements for public comment, they re-vote to create the Algiers Charter School District, converting all 13 schools on the west bank to charter schools. Eight are slated to open in November, with 5 additional schools opening at a later date. The new district has no board of directors, so the Orleans Parish School Board names itself as the founding board.
- ◆ The Board also grants charters to 7 east-bank schools. One of those is for the establishment of Lusher Middle and High School. The Board agrees to turn over the Alcee Fortier High School building for Lusher’s expansion into a K–12 charter with two campuses. Fortier was a virtually all-Black, low-performing high school with just over 900 students before the storm. Most of these families are still outside the city and are not aware that their school is being closed, and the building handed over to Lusher. The new Lusher charter school will be a selective admissions school, with first preference given to the children of professional staff at Tulane, Loyola, Dillard and Xavier Universities. (When registration at Lusher begins, the school reaches capacity so quickly that even some former Lusher Elementary students are denied access to the middle school). In the months after the takeover of Fortier, Tulane University helps raise over \$15 million in private and public funds to renovate the Fortier building.
- ◆ In the face of concern that the growing number of charter schools in the city might attempt to “cream” their student bodies, the school board passes a resolution requiring each charter approved by the board to accept a minimum of 10% students with disabilities and a minimum of 20% low-income students (prior to Katrina, 20% of New Orleans public school students are in special education, and 75% are eligible for free and reduced meals). Yet, conceding that it would be unrealistic to expect compliance with these requirements given the uncertain and still-chaotic situation in the city, the resolution allows schools to waive them until New Orleans is “fully repopulated.”¹²



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Worse Than Those Six Days in the Dome

By Maria Hernandez

When Katrina hit New Orleans, I was two weeks into my senior year at Frederick Douglass Senior High School. My friends and I were frantically trying to keep our school from closing. Douglass was one of the lowest ranking schools in the district, so the state, using its accountability plan, was trying to shut it down or take it over. We were running a campaign called Quality Education as a Civil Right, doing our part in this one-year-old national campaign by continuing the work we had been doing at Douglass: involving more parents and students and community members in working together to improve the school and to demand all the resources we needed to do that.

A lot of people were finally looking at our school as more than just a place where criminals are reared, which is the impression you'd get if all you knew were news reports. The media always ran to the school to report a fight, but no one said anything when my classmates placed first in a competition against professional journalists for a series they wrote on public education at the 50th Anniversary of Brown vs. Board Education. But for folks who knew what we were doing and spent time with us, you could see them actually smiling when Douglass was mentioned.

In the midst of all this, I was extremely bummed out. I was bored of walking the same

old halls and knowing everybody who walked by. I was ready for a change. I got more than I bargained for when Katrina hit.

So far I've had to start my senior year three times at three different schools in three different cities. All of these changes happened within one month's time. From Douglass in New Orleans to Telequa High outside of Muscogee, Oklahoma and from Telequa to Union High in Tulsa. Now after everything is said and done, I miss the high school that was supposed to be my alma mater. I'm afraid to get my class ring, because we might just move again, and I'd be stuck.

Looking back on the last few days of August, I still can't believe we spent six days in the Superdome, the stadium that housed thousands of hurricane victims, without knowing if my dad was dead or alive. We had to sneak out of the Superdome and swim past corpses and bayou animals to find him. I sliced my leg in the process of avoiding a dead woman floating.

*"The media always ran to the school to report a fight, but **no one said anything when my classmates placed first in a competition** against professional journalists..."*

We found my dad, and my uncle, who was with him in the old neighborhood. They had survived by swimming from roof to roof. It was a relief to find all of them okay, but there's nothing worse than walking into your 'hood and not recognizing it: Water waist deep, the stores all looted, or in the process of being looted. I couldn't help but let tears fall. It just cut deep to know that my home was the new Atlantis.

As they say home is where the heart is. So I guess my heart is 20,000 leagues under the sea. That would be a good explanation for the emptiness that comes through my chest and expands to my body and words. It's hard to keep going and pushing when you don't even know if what you're looking for is still there.



Everything feels uncertain, including my education. Nobody knows the procedures and regulations of what to do with my grades and my units. They're not sure which credits will transfer and whether I can graduate on time, even though in New Orleans, I only needed three courses.

This uncertainty that's strangling me is also undermining Douglass, the school my friends were fighting to make better. When we gathered for a weekend reunion on October 8th and 9th, we learned that all the New Orleans Public Schools would become charter schools this year. We had been fighting to improve from within

neighborhood schools that don't have selective admissions. Now, with all schools being charters, no one will have the choice of truly public, neighborhood-based education.

And worse than that, the only public high schools open on the east bank of the city, where the hurricane hit the hardest and where probably over 80% of the population, my family and all of my friends live, have selective admission criteria. How can these decision makers open two high schools on the east bank, but none for common folk like me, who either can't get into or don't want to get into selective admission high schools?

I've lost my home, my friends, and my school.

I'm always on the verge of tears. But the worst part of it all is that the public officials—both elected and hired—who are supposed to be looking out for my education have failed me even worse than the ones who abandoned me in the Superdome. My family and friends have food and water and the kindness of strangers. But we still don't have control of our lives, and we're still being abandoned by local, state, and federal officials.

It's the middle of October, and I'm in the same situation I was before Katrina: but now I'm fighting to reopen Douglass and other neighborhood high schools in New Orleans and to provide quality education for people like me. ●

*“The public officials—both elected and hired—who are supposed to be looking out for my education **have failed me** even worse than the ones who abandoned me in the Superdome.”*



...for so long the city had separated its children into pockets of poverty and privilege, and now the two worlds were colliding before us.

—Adriane Frazier



November 28

The first public school in the city – Benjamin Franklin Elementary Math and Science School – opens its doors to students. Ben Franklin was a selective admissions school before Katrina, but opens now without restriction for any elementary students who are back in the city.

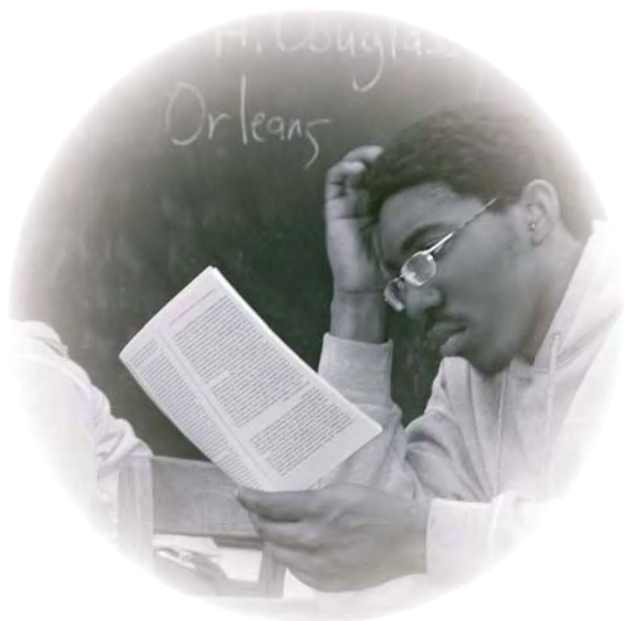


November 30

The state legislature votes to take over the 107 New Orleans Public Schools that performed at or below the state average in 2004-05. The legislation, known as Act 35, creates the Recovery School District (RSD) as the operating entity for these schools. The legislature leaves only 4 schools under the control of the Orleans Parish School Board. Ironically, these are the formerly high-performing schools in the city. All but three of fifteen Orleans Parish legislators vote against the takeover.

The governing body for the Recovery School District is the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), a partly appointed, partly elected board that meets in Baton Rouge. Only one of the eleven-member board is elected by the citizens of New Orleans (2 of the 3 appointed representatives are from New Orleans). Three of the eleven-member board are African Americans.

Neither the Recovery School District, nor any charter schools honor the collective bargaining agreement of the United Teachers of New Orleans, or negotiate with the union for new contracts.



AS THE NEW YEAR APPROACHES, an increasing number of African Americans are beginning to migrate back to New Orleans. While returning to the Ninth Ward is impossible (armed military personnel continue to bar access to the neighborhood and no demolition or rebuilding is allowed), returning families are finding temporary or permanent shelter elsewhere in the city.



December 9

The Orleans Parish School Board votes to fire all teachers and other employees of the New Orleans Public Schools, effective January 31, 2006. A lawsuit filed by several employees succeeds in winning a temporary restraining order, putting the official firings on hold for 2 months.

Many returning teachers express anger at the rapidly proliferating charter schools, which are requiring teachers to take written tests as part of the application process, and require teachers to work on year-to-year contracts. Many teachers opt to take early retirement, which gives them access to union health insurance and pension plans they otherwise fear losing. Hundreds find teaching positions outside of New Orleans.



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December 14

Five Algiers schools open their doors as charter schools.

What's next for the highly qualified, unemployed, displaced educators? Does anybody know?

—Katrena Jackson-Ndang

2006

By the end of January there are 17 schools open in New Orleans.

- 3 are Orleans Parish public schools
- 3 are charters authorized by the Recovery School District
- 5 are charters operated by the Algiers Charter School District
- 6 are charters operated by other entities

All of the Algiers Charter elementary schools are reported to be at full capacity and are turning children away.

January 17

The Mayor's "Bring New Orleans Back Commission" releases its Education Committee report. Among other things, the Committee recommends establishing a "single aligned governing body" to provide a unified vision and stronger accountability for public schools in New Orleans. Even the pro-charter chairman of the Committee expresses concern that, without some central oversight, it will be difficult to guarantee, or even adequately monitor the schools' academic and administrative quality.

State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard rejects the idea of any centralized oversight.¹³

January 28

A lawsuit is filed in New Orleans by civil rights attorney Tracie Washington. The suit presents the names of 13 students, including one with autism, who have been denied seats in some of the city's schools.

The same day, Orleans Parish officials present state officials with a list of 170 students who have been turned away from New Orleans schools. There is emerging concern that the city's charter schools are filled to capacity, and not enough guaranteed-access schools are available for the increasing number of returning students. The State's Recovery School District – which will offer universal access – is not scheduled to operate at scale until the 2006–07 school year.

What's needed are more open admission, universal access schools. But there's no money for the Orleans Parish School Board to repair and staff additional buildings. The money is in charters, they are told. Groups wanting to open charter schools can receive as much as \$2,000 per student to get up and running. Federal and foundation funding is beginning to flow in to New Orleans, but the public system is not seeing that cash.

February 16

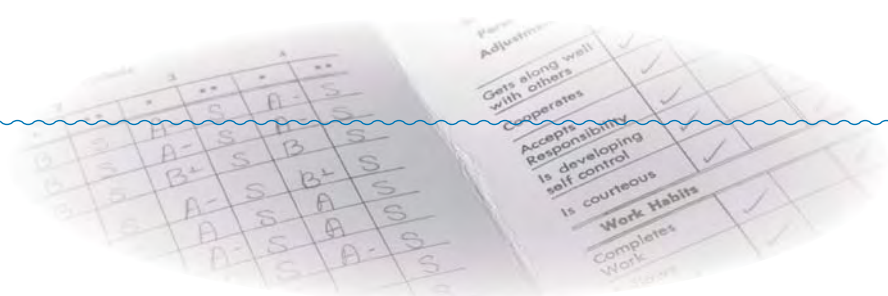
The Orleans Parish School Board again votes 4-1 to fire 7,500 teachers and other school employees. Attorneys representing some of these workers note that, if they remain furloughed, rather than are fired, they are entitled by law to first consideration for teaching and other positions in the Recovery School District. But the vote proceeds anyway. Everyone knows that one of the agendas playing out in the room is the elimination of collective bargaining for the district's workforce.

May 18

The Orleans Parish School Board announces their plan to re-establish academic admissions criteria at the four schools they are operating.

Charges continue to surface that hundreds of children have been turned away from the city's charter schools.¹⁵ Many charters are already full, and need not accept additional students. But there is also a flood of anecdotal evidence that the schools are turning away, and/or failing to provide services for children with disabilities, in violation of federal law. Without a centralized administration, the charter schools lack the shared infrastructure to offer the expensive, specialized and multi-faceted services required under law. Neither is there a functioning enforcement mechanism.

What is emerging in New Orleans is a patchwork of independently operated schools, each with its own admissions procedures and policies and educational strategies. There are no schools that guarantee access to students living within defined neighborhood boundaries. There is no transportation provided to children who enroll in schools that are outside of walking distance from their shelters, trailers or homes.¹⁶ Parents returning to the city and seeking a desk for their children must navigate this "new paradigm" alone.



*“Once you fire them [union teachers], **the State is going to wipe the slate clean** so (State Education Superintendent) Cecil Picard and (State BESE Member) Leslie Jacobs won't have to rehire them.”*

—Willie Zanders, attorney for some of the impacted school employees.¹⁴

Rebuilding New Orleans, Redoing Education *By Christopher Burton*

I attended the lowest ranked high school in the state of Louisiana. Located in the city of New Orleans, where I was born and raised, Frederick A. Douglass is my alma mater. It is the only high school I enrolled in, and I'm proud to have spent my four years there. Coming from the bottom school, I think that I have a legitimate say about what should be done to improve the public schools now that Hurricane Katrina has opened room for change.

Being singled out as one of the brightest students in my middle school, I was strongly discouraged from attending Douglass. Out of my 8th grade class, three of the top students, including my sister and I, went to Douglass. The rest went to all the best public schools and private schools in the city. They were influenced by parents, friends, and teachers to separate themselves from other students. They were taught to see themselves as better than a low performing student.

I put a lot of thought into my decision of where to continue my education. I knew what I would be saying if I decided to go to school with all the other quote/unquote smart kids. My sister and I could not decide where to go. Both of us had very high grades coming out of Colton Middle School. Up to that point I hadn't talked a lot at school and favored to keep my mouth closed and be impersonal, the way my family instructed me to do.

I started observing school life when I was singled out in elementary school. In the 4th grade my teacher thought me bright enough to try for the gifted test. Mind you that I was a 9-year-old boy whom the school board had known to be hearing impaired since kindergarten. I began speech therapy at 5 years old, but there was no attempt other than that to help me. I was still sort of like the kids in my class, except that I was already exceptional, having somehow been able to get kept back in kindergarten.

Once this teacher recommended me to take the test to get into gifted, I became more exceptional. I passed the test with flying colors, and some of the adults took notice. During my Individual Education Plan evaluation, these adults decided I was worth the effort to make a success. I got a gifted class, with a small number of students and an itinerant resource teacher who helped me with whatever I needed help with. With these new services coupled with speech therapy, I was able to stay out of my fifth grade regular classroom about half of the school day daily. And piling one good thing upon another good thing, I started being called for over the PA system a lot. I never got called down for being bad, though. It was always because my itinerant teacher had arrived or the school nurse wanted to take me for a hearing test or the principal wanted to give me a ribbon for student of the week.

While all these good things were going on, my regular classmates made fun of me because of my big ears, my funny speech, and me being the oldest or at least the tallest boy in my grade. I don't think the students liked me much. Maybe the teachers had started using me as an example of a good student. They probably hated the fact that teachers placed me on this pinnacle without ever looking at the students they had and helping them to succeed.

My suspicion of malice came true my 5th grade year at an awards ceremony. Every time I walked onto the stage to receive an award, I got booed. Maybe the crowd all knew that I had cheated.

I had received aid and attention that should have been directed also at the children more in need of it than me. After that night, having been booed in front of my sister and grandma and having almost cried, I developed modesty. Knowing that I was not the average student, I tried to become the average student.

It didn't work out, however. In 9th grade I tried to do nothing extracurricular, make C's and D's and hang out with my friends. It didn't happen that way, because I couldn't resist doing



class work and homework. It's a hard habit to break when you've been trained to do school work for 8 years of your 13-year-old life. Besides that I had a track record that said that I was not that kind of student. The counselor rode my ass behind my first four grades, three A's and one C.

My years in school did not show me much disparity in opportunities given to students until I began high school. The counselor offered me every academic opportunity that she could. My Gifted teacher got me a summer job being a mentor for Bunch Middle School students. And my itinerant teacher helped me manage life, school, and everything in between having been my teacher for 5 years. I was definitely over privileged in high school. I noticed that the counselor didn't try to straighten out any of the students with bad track records. The students with bad track records represented a good-sized portion of the school, Douglass being the last chance for many students expelled from other schools or formerly imprisoned. The itinerant teacher was only meant to help me at Douglass and a small number of students across the district whom the school board considered worthy of its time. The Gifted teacher was only assigned the brightest students in the school. My 9th grade year that was only one person, me.

The privileged few get all the resources, and the majority is given close to nothing. Benjamin Franklin High School, the top-ranked school in

Louisiana, is in the same public school district as Douglass. The school was designed to be a school for gifted students. It is inconsequential that the majority of students in that school are white. McDonogh 35 is a high-ranking school, one of the only primarily black high ranking schools in the state. It was designed to be a school for the high achieving black students. If schools are able to be like Franklin and 35, then the public schools will never be improved in New Orleans. When every last student is taken care of and able to get the attention reserved for the few, the few who used to be only the noble class and rich class, then New Orleans

When every last student is taken care of and able to get the attention reserved for the few ... then New Orleans schools will improve.

schools will improve. The public schools need to be public in the absolute sense of the word. In order to improve New Orleans schools we must break from helping some get a good education to help everyone get a good education.

I've come back to the city and have transferred from Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia to the University of New Orleans. My reasons: one, I couldn't handle the tuition up there; two, there was a confederate flag

in the 2nd flood window all year in one of the dorm rooms; and three, I could not sit back and watch the school system I came out of become less for the average student and more for the privileged students. I came back because charter schools to me will widen the education gap more than Benjamin Franklin or McDonogh #35 were doing before the storm. Now schools are recruiting teachers as well as students. A gifted resource teacher whom I know who works at Benjamin Franklin Elementary in the Orleans Public School system has had offers, each including a salary bonus, from independent, Orleans Parish School Board, and Recovery

School District charter schools. The problem of how to teach the students who can't get into a charter school or a selective admissions school is still not being addressed. Before I set off for college, I had been working, mainly through Students at the Center (SAC) and the Frederick Douglass Community Coalition (FDCC), to get resources to Douglass and give opportunities to its students. Now that I am back I will continue that struggle. ●

Return to Community

By Adriane Frazier

Journal: Journey to a Memory

The sun wrapped itself around me, each ray a ribbon of heat with its stubborn Southern grip. It was pretty warm for a February evening. I had driven the whole day from Atlanta with the windows down. The air was thick and heavy, the smell of death suspended. Abandoned cars dotted long stretches of highway whispering tales of past lives. Crumbled cypress and mangled iron were swept into the streets, and dreams were carried off into the wind and scattered. I wonder what happens to a tree when it is uprooted. Is it dead forever? Or do the roots go so deep that once toppled it can grow again, even if only beneath the surface, hidden from sight? My mind drifts when fatigue finds love in humidity. I had after all been driving for over seven hours. I found myself back home, back in New Orleans. But it wasn't my beloved where I could lose myself in Louie's trumpet song. I used to bathe in magnolia-scented water and fantasize about long pirogue rides down bayous where moss would stretch out its fingers to caress my shoulders. Instead it was empty, fragile, and anemic. No longer an elder of Creole antiquity, it seemed infantile and helpless. I drove down streets that were starved of sound, of any life at all, and I began to wonder why I had come back. Why would I subject myself to witnessing the slow unravel of centuries of the culture-making threads that were woven into the fabric of who we were, to see skeletons dusty with deceit released from closets and hands made bloody with inaction? I did not know all the answers,

but I knew that I had driven all that way without vacillation. The uncertainty was more about what to expect from the young people I was soon to meet.

Defining Purpose: "A Renaissance for Resistance"

I remember being struck by the coldness of the classroom. I focused on it, because the room had become so quiet. I noticed the students shifting in their seats, heard them grumble under their breath, and I watched as they began to try and deflect attention from themselves. Co-Director of Students at the Center (SAC), Kalamu Ya Salaam, had posed a question to the class of seniors about how they felt about attending a school where the population was now made up of students from many different schools and neighborhoods. The young men who had formerly attended Fortier High School were the first to speak up. Fortier was one of the lower performing schools in Orleans Parish, and it sits less than a mile from Eleanor McMain, the once selective admissions school now turned all-access in post-Katrina New Orleans.

*I remember being struck by the coldness of the classroom. I focused on it, because **the room had become so quiet.***

"Yeah, I wanna know why ya'll think and act like ya'll better than us or something," one of the young men said. The young women who had gone to McMain responded by initially giggling and then getting a hold of themselves to say innocently, "Huh? We don't think that. Ya'll treat us like we should feel bad that we wanted to go to a good school."

I could tell by the way the class began to chime in that the discussion was going to get heated. This was a touchy subject, because for so long the city had separated its children into pockets of poverty and privilege, and now the two worlds were colliding before us.

It was obvious that they had not really hashed out these issues before, at least not in a safe space where each person could be heard and respected. After all, many of them were just returning to New Orleans after having been displaced, some three and four times over. And that was definitely the last thing they wanted to talk about. Instead



there was a reticence to talk about anything that had to do with the hurricane, to lock away all of those moments into the most recessed chambers of the mind in an effort to push forward, cope, or as I hear them say often “to just try to make it.” It was in their eyes though. The memories of Katrina flooded their eyes. It left them aged and worn marbles inside young bodies.

As time has progressed the students have begun to trust us. Their recent writings reflect revelations of more personal narratives, and as a result how they relate to each other has changed. They have more patience for one another now and more tolerance for each other’s differences and opinions. The staff of SAC continues to encourage community involvement, and some of the students have chosen to become involved in being the voice of the now seemingly impotent New Orleans Public School district. They are being heard by local and national organizations involved in the fight to preserve public education. They are indeed the lifeblood of the system. It is a system that before chose to keep them muzzled, marginalized and jaded about the ability of their own power to effect any change at all.

Even less aware of this power are the students in the sophomore writing lab class. Each day proves challenging, because there are so many teenage drama issues at that age that now exist in tandem with the serious life issues that this particular group of young people must confront.

On my third day in the classroom I found myself arguing with a student who was being so disrespectful to her peers and to the staff. For a minute I lost myself in the frustration of the

circumstances and allowed this fifteen-year-old young woman to do exactly what she intended. I did not find out what those intentions were until over a month later when the two of us were sitting together one day. She told me that she expected we wouldn’t be around long, that we would leave after it got too hard just like some of her teachers had. I realized then that she had tried to push us all away with her brashness and defiance. I sat and listened to her and watched her eyes soften. I knew that she wanted me to stay as much as I wanted to be there, even if she

*She told me that she expected we wouldn’t be around long, that **we would leave after it got too hard** just like some of her teachers had.*

never said so. And she didn’t have to, because I didn’t have any plans to leave.

Many of them are dealing with difficult issues at home. Young men have fathers who may be incarcerated or absent, and I am certain some of the young women are finding it hard to be teenage girls in a city that is bursting at the seams with hoards of crews of male construction workers and the male-dominated police force and fire department. There is diffidence in some of the girls and a blatant bloody fight for attention in the others. It all converges like a beautiful unchoreographed dance each day in class. We just try to balance all the drama and channel some of it into the writings and discussions. Currently, we are trying to get them to display their writings using

different mediums. This has been tough, but the use of previous SAC writings and videos has proven to be effective in piquing their interest in using their writing as a way to shape community space. For instance, the other day we had a screening of Baby Love, a feature length video that SAC produced when I was in high school, and the students in class really responded to it. It addresses topics of teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, suicide, and abortion. We facilitated discussions about the themes as well as answered questions about the production process. I think it really

helped in demonstrating how a discussion, idea, or piece of writing can evolve into something that becomes a social education tool for their peers and extended community.

As a matter of fact I feel like that was the missing link for me after graduating from college. How does all the theory and academia translate and evolve into something that is tangible and useful for society? After Katrina devastated New Orleans and temporarily re-routed me to Atlanta I could not help but feel a level of responsibility to the people. It was the same feeling that sat in the pit of my stomach as I watched genocide occur unchecked in Sudan while I was in college. I wanted to be there even if it meant instability, insecurity, or threat to life. The real threat was indifference to the quality or sheer existence of

human life. I saw the same disinherited bodies worn down by poverty and abandonment walk miles down the empty interstates and wade through muddy waters in search of refuge. This is what compelled me to return to New Orleans, allowing myself to be affected, to resist the trappings and distractions of the modern world, surrendering myself to purpose.

Each day here is fresh, and that is why Students at the Center is so important. The way we teach is organic and unassuming. Lessons and assignments come out of the dynamic experiences and concerns of the students. It creates an academic sanctuary for shedding and reconstructing identity and empowering young people. It is a space in which I too can be reborn, baptized in their smiles. We are there every day, and we are resilient despite their resistance to or refusal of our help. Our presence reinforces the recognition of the fact that someone is fighting for them. And their willingness to be vulnerable to us, if even for a moment, is indicative of their commitment to join us in that fight. Students at the Center stands ready to encourage them to remain rooted in something they know and love and to grow, even if that growth is hidden or unacknowledged beneath the surface and out of sight. ●



PHOTO COURTESY OF BETTY BASTIDAS

*We are there every day, and **we are resilient** despite their resistance to or refusal of our help. Our presence reinforces the recognition of the fact that someone is fighting for them.*

Spring, 2006

As new schools continue to open and establish their own admissions and enrollment rules across the city, a tug-of-war is developing over high-performing and low-performing students. Each school operator – the Orleans Parish School Board, and each independent charter board – knows that they will be evaluated based on the academic achievement of their students. This creates an incentive to limit the number of students likely to be under-achievers, and those requiring expensive special education services. Some schools are quickly filled to capacity by students whose savvy parents have registered them early and efficiently at some of the most promising charter schools. Other schools seem to turn away students with special needs, claiming that they are unable to provide the necessary support.

As more and more New Orleanians return to the city, however, there is an indisputable shortage of seats for a large block of children whose parents were late in returning, who have been unable to navigate the completely decentralized system, or who have no transportation to access the process, which virtually requires school-by-school registration. These students, clearly left behind, are disproportionately the poor, and those with special needs.

By June, there are 25 public schools are operating in New Orleans;

- ◆ 4 of them are run by the Orleans Parish public schools;
- ◆ 7 are charters authorized by the Recovery School District;
- ◆ 6 are charters affiliated with the Algiers Charter School District
- ◆ 8 are charters authorized and run independently

\$24 MILLION FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS



June 7

The operating plan for the Recovery School District is released. Like the Orleans Parish resolution, it requires that schools chartered by the state admit a minimum of 10% students with disabilities.¹⁷



June 12

Federal Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announces an additional \$24 million grant to Louisiana for the development of charter schools.¹⁸





June 14

The Recovery School District (RSD) announces that it must postpone the opening of RSD schools for the 2006-07 school year.¹⁹ Seven months after it is established by legislative mandate, the district has yet to hire a *single* teacher for its schools.²⁰

The chief of staff for the Recovery School District acknowledges²¹ that the district has only 10 people on its administrative staff. *One* of these employees is tasked with coordinating special education programs which require students to be individually assessed and placed. Some estimates are that as many as 2,000 special education students have failed to find seats in the city's charter schools.



July 1

The existing collective bargaining agreement between the United Teachers of New Orleans and the New Orleans Public Schools expires. Now, even those teachers working in Orleans Parish-run public schools are working without a contract. The Orleans Parish School Board makes no move to renew the agreement.



July 27

The Algiers Charter School Association, which plans to have a total of 8 schools open in 2006–07, passes a fiscal year budget that includes a \$12 million *reserve fund*.²²

*“I don’t go to school. My mama tried to put us in school and **nobody would take us**, so we don’t go to school. We might go back to Dallas. They like us in Dallas.”*

—Young boy in New Orleans²³

Does Anybody Know?

By Katrena Jackson-Ndang



On Saturday, July 15, 2006, at about 1:00 P.M., dark clouds gathered and lightning and thunderbolts filled the New Orleans sky. One hour later the sky opened and dropped buckets of rain on the city. But rain, dark clouds, or thunderbolts could not keep eager students, faculty, staff and parents from gathering at Southern Oaks

Plantation, to celebrate the end of the school year for Lawless High School.

Alfred Lawless High School, the only public high school in the Lower Ninth Ward (below the Industrial Canal), was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

For the first time in the school's 42-year history

there was no ring ceremony, no prom, no homecoming, no winter formal, no sweetheart ball and no graduation. So the July 15 celebration represented many different milestones. For some people this was a Lawless Family Reunion. It was a graduation for the class of 2006. For the class of 2007, this was a Junior Prom. The classes of 1986 and 1996 took this as their class reunion, and for 20 of the 68 faculty and staff members, this was a retirement party. For those going back to distant

places like California, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas, it was a bon voyage party. But sadly for many others gathered there, it was a memorial for the four Lawless loved ones who died during the storm.

This celebration was for the Lawless Family, but the sentiments of the whole city were felt

I was lead teacher on a U.S. Department of Education grant to the New Orleans Public Schools to improve the teaching of American History.

in that room. For you see, there are so many parallels between what happened in the city in general and what happened to Lawless and New Orleans Public Schools in particular. Lawless lost four family members due to the storm, while the city lost more than 1,500 family members. The school district, which had more than 100 schools before the storm, lost all of its schools except for four as a result of a state take over of public schools in Orleans Parish. Charter schools became the buzzword for what was needed to reform the school system in New Orleans. Even schools that were already exemplary became charter schools.

Pushed by the state, the school district terminated more than 4,000 educators. Twenty Lawless faculty and staff members were among the 2,000 educators forced to retire. I am among the 20 retirees from Lawless, and I can say, like many others, I was not ready to retire, but was forced to in order to maintain some semblance of benefits and peace of mind. I am highly qualified according to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), because I continually upgraded myself in my content area. In fact, I was lead teacher on a U. S. Department of Education grant to the New Orleans Public Schools to improve the teaching of American History. This massive termination of educators caused the current shortage of qualified teachers. Furthermore, New Orleans lost at least 8,000 people who were part of its middle-class tax base. In other words, at least 4,000 highly qualified educators will educate children in other states and districts, because they have been denied jobs in the new charter schools and the State Recovery School District (RSD).

Many highly qualified educators are not working in the new charter schools and the Recovery School District, because these districts are using unfair tactics to undermine the professionalism and the respect of veteran teachers. The test that these districts administer is an insult to the profession of teaching. Orleans Parish is the only district in which such tests



*These districts are using **unfair tactics** to **undermine** the professionalism and the respect of veteran teachers.*

take place. In any other school district, the state deems its certification system, which includes the national praxis exam, a good measure for hiring teachers. I worry that these new schools only want to hire teachers who have never taught before. They want to hire inexperienced teachers so that they can pay them little or no money and also so that they can treat them like sharecroppers or better still like slaves with no rights and no input or say about what happens in the schools.

For three hours on July 15 the Alfred Lawless High School family forgot about the troubles of Hurricane-ravaged New Orleans and concentrated on the school's happier days and memories. In fact, someone had a flashback and began to shout the Pythian (the school mascot) victory yell: "L- A- W- L- E- S- S, BUCK 'EM' UP, BUCK 'EM' UP, PYTHIANS, BUCK 'EM' UP!" The victory yell symbolized an end to the festivities for this year, but not to the spirit of the school and the family. The festivities are over for this year, but the questions remain. What's next for Lawless and all the other public schools in the district? Does anybody know? What's next for the highly qualified, unemployed, displaced educators? Does anybody know? ●



What's next? ...
Does anybody know?

Total Number of Schools
Opening in
New Orleans for
2006-07 School Year:

53

Total Number of Entities
Operating
these Schools:

21

Number of selective
admission schools:

10 (19%)

*“New Orleans is such a **great example** of what
you can do if you start over.”*

*—Jeanne Allen, founder of the Center for Education Reform,
a charter advocacy organization.²⁴*

A GREAT EXAMPLE?

The State Department of Education issues a list of New Orleans public schools that will be opening for the 2006-07 school year. Of these schools:

- 13 are charters authorized by the Recovery School District and operated by independent charter associations, for-profit entities, national charter school operators or others;
- 6 are charters operated by the Algiers Charter School Association;
- 2 are charters authorized directly by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and operated by separate entities;
- 5 schools are operated directly by the Orleans Parish School Board. Four of those are selective admission schools;
- 10 are charters approved by the Orleans Parish School Board and operated by a range of groups;
- 17 are operated directly by the Recovery School District. They are all open admission schools and must guarantee seats for all students who enroll.

Honoring Community II *By Ashley Jones*

Nearly one year after Hurricane Katrina, we are finally in the rebuilding stages of the city as well as the school system – or systems, since within the title "public schools," we have three different types set up in the city. There is the Recovery District public school system that is state run. The charter school system, which in itself, can be seen as individual systems, since charters create their own criteria in selecting students, teachers and curriculum. And the barely-here New Orleans Public School system consists of five schools. The Recovery District school system claims that it offers its services to all students. Yet even before Hurricane Katrina when it along with the University of New Orleans chartered its first school, Capdau Middle, it was able to purge this school of the 20 percent of students who had learning disabilities or behavioral problems. Since the storm, however, the state now has to take on these "rotten apples," not just the wonderfully ripe, red and polished hand-picked pupils that populated the schools its accountability plan labeled most successful.

The selectivity of student populations is not the Recovery District's biggest problem, however. Recovery District schools have to start weeks later than the New Orleans Public School system due to the lack of teachers and administrators needed to properly run its schools. This scramble for staff is made difficult

since the flat out firing and forced retirement many veteran teachers were subject to in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Now there are not many seasoned teachers available. Most of the veteran teachers have relocated to other places

It is impossible for us to repair our city as one community when our children have to navigate three very different school systems.

around the state and across the country, while those who have decided to stay are teaching in the New Orleans Public Schools. Many charter schools are hiring recent college graduates who only have theory and not the practice of teaching, because they are less expensive and easier to manipulate than veteran or union teachers. This means that many of these young teachers will be stepping into a real classroom for the first time, in front of 20 to 30 storms – afflicted kids who truly do need teachers who understand their culture and their personal circumstances. It is hard to believe that a first-time teacher from Boston who has never been to New Orleans prior to Katrina and who has

never had a natural disaster uproot his or her own community could give these students the kind of attention and development needed for them to not only cope with but move past the devastation of their city and their lives.

The land- or building- grab involving the charter and state-run schools explains why out of the five truly public schools in the city, two of those share the same building. The bottom line is that it is impossible for us to repair our city as one community when our children have to navigate three very different school systems.

The one good thing about the dismantling of the public school system is that those still working within it have the space and freedom to rebuild it into the school system it needs to be. With help, the public school system will be able to educate and uplift all of our community's children in a way that will validate and utilize all of their talents and gifts, giving each and every student the feeling of being valuable because of their differences – not left to fail because of them. ●



OPENING DAY!



August 7

Opening day for students in the Algiers Charter School District

August 15

Opening day for students in the New Orleans Public School District

August 17

Just three weeks before opening day, the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education revokes the charters of three schools in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans. The schools' partnership with a San Diego-based corporation that helps operate charter schools in several states, has fallen apart over disagreements between the corporation and the local association board on issues including hiring and curriculum. Over 500 students enrolled at the three schools must now find alternative placements.

September 2

The Recovery School District pushes back opening day for several New Orleans schools that had been slated to start on September 7. The RSD announces that it still has over 170 teacher vacancies to fill. The state-run high schools are re-scheduled to begin opening between September 11th and 14th. Several charter schools also announce push-backs in their opening dates, citing delays in renovation and construction work.

September 7

Opening day for students in the Recovery School District elementary schools. Start dates for additional RSD schools and many of the charters continue through September 18th, creating a six-week span in school openings across the city.

“Why am I still sitting here begging to get a child in to school?”

—Debra Smith, New Orleans parent,²⁵ in mid-August

?

Students at the Center, Educators at Heart *By Jim Randels*

In late August, 2005, during the second week of school, Z tapped me on the shoulder right after class and asked if I'd talk to him outside. Z's big for his age and probably a couple years older than his classmates in my sophomore English class. He'd been struggling to make it to class every day, holding a white hand towel soaked in menthol rub over his face and working a pack of tissue to keep his nose clean. The first day he arrived with his summer cold gear I thanked him for making the effort to be in school.

I'd seen Z in the halls the previous year. He's the sort of young man who didn't always go to class. And his size and facial expression and body language might seem menacing to someone who sees him around school but doesn't really know him. But I've been a student and teacher in the public schools in New Orleans for over 30 years, so even last year when I didn't know him, I had no problem just hurrying Z along to where he was supposed to be.

So when he asked to cut into our precious 30 minute lunch break for a conversation in the hall, I was glad to join him.

"Let me file these essays before I lose them, and then I'll be right there."

When I made it outside, he was leaning against the wall in the dimly lit hallway, clutching his rag and nodding at fellow band members as they rushed to the stairwell.

"Mr. Randels, I wanted to ask if you'd teach me how to read."

Z's request calls to mind four key issues about the educational circumstances and strategies under which Students at the Center has been working both before and after Katrina.

- ① Our neighborhood high school had a population of approximately 20% special education students. This proportion was about the same for the twelve other neighborhood high schools in the New Orleans Public Schools. Before Katrina, our system also had six selective admissions public high schools. The only special education students at these schools were those who were academically gifted, talented in the arts, or had an exceptionality concerning their physical abilities.
- ② We work in the conditions in which we find ourselves. Those of us who work in Students at the Center at Douglass (and other public schools) have not spent our time complaining about these educational situations. Instead, we want the public and policy makers to understand the different types of schools we have in New Orleans.

And more importantly we want to learn how to teach Z and his classmates as best we can. Only engaged in practice can we learn the strategies we need. In Z's case, I believe his willingness to ask for assistance after less than two weeks of time in our class comes from the fact that we engaged him in oral processes. His thoughts and

*"Mr. Randels, I wanted to ask if you'd **teach me how to read.**"*

words had a space of respect in our classroom. I still remember his comments about a classmate's essay about a difficult family relationship. He related a story from his own experience, asked a probing question, and offered a reassuring comment to the writer. But it's not so much what Z said that I remember; it's the expressions on the faces of his classmate who suddenly saw Z in a new way.

- ③ We understand students as a resource. I could not fulfill Z's request to learn to read on a personal level. He needed daily one-on-one attention. We do, however, have veteran SAC students who have trained in our classes to be resources in literacy

development to our students. Rodneka Shelbia, who would have been a senior at Douglass, has been part of SAC since her 9th grade year. She has trained in Reciprocal Teaching and other methods for helping to improve reading abilities. She and Z are also friends. Rodneka agreed to work with Z on his reading every day as part of her elective SAC course. Z was eager for this help. Then the storm came.

- ④ Young people such as Z are eager to learn, given the right conditions. We need to help create those conditions and find ways to assess and respect the whole

*Labeling schools such as Douglass as failures based primarily on their test scores is **a disservice to the education of our students.***

student. Labeling schools such as Douglass as failures based primarily on their test scores is a disservice to the education of our students. Instead of one size fits all approaches, we need ways to measure what it means for me to teach Sophomore English in a class that includes about 20% of students who face educational challenges similar to Z's. Instead of Z's state test

scores being the only way to measure his worth and success as a student, we also need ways to measure (and to compute into the formulas that allow states to hand over public schools to private entities) Z's desire to read and the efforts that brought him to that point.

These questions are pressing as we return to a public school system in New Orleans that will now be run by the state and by foundations, corporations and universities. It is not a public school system created and run by teachers, parents and students who have worked hard

– and with pockets of success – to educate the young people not allowed in to schools the state has labeled academically acceptable. Z won't be with us in the return to New Orleans. Word is he drowned in the storm. But for the sake of the many young people like Z, I hope policy makers and national experts will listen to the lessons veteran New Orleans educators have learned from Z. ●

Epilogue

By Maria Hernandez

August 1, 2006, I just received my diploma from some high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where my family is still stuck. Like many of my Douglass classmates, my family has difficulty returning because apartments to rent in New Orleans are too expensive or unavailable. I am happy to hear that Douglass is going to open in the fall, but I worry that some of the things we were building there will just be ignored by the state education department, which took control of the schools away from local educators and families. I'm especially happy to learn that my compadres in Students at the Center will still be working in the neighborhood and at the school. I'll support them and my drying out Atlantis city from 1,000 miles away, until I return. ●

Postscript

Taking advantage of disarray and inertia by local officials, and the willingness of the federal government to heavily bankroll its alternative vision, powerful interests in education reform took the reins in New Orleans to recreate “public” education under a market model.

As the new school year gets underway, little relating to the K-12 educational process in New Orleans is clear, or easy. Students are still looking for places to hang their backpacks; parents are still crisscrossing the city trying to navigate a system that barely qualifies as “public,” but for the millions of public dollars that have funded its creation.

Time will tell whether this experiment – with some of the neediest students in the nation – will work from an academic standpoint. The most recent studies of charter school performance around the country suggest that it may not. On August 22, the U.S. Department of Education released a new report showing that traditional public schools significantly out-perform independent charter schools.²⁶

All of the schools in New Orleans must release data on who they are educating, what they are teaching, the qualifications of their teachers and the academic achievement of their students. But the process for ensuring that basic accountability is as decentralized as the “system” itself. It will be months, or even longer before a true picture develops of how students are faring in the New Orleans schools, and whether this new paradigm is indeed serving the needs of all the city’s children.

So we wait. But no additional time is needed to assert that the dismantling of the New Orleans public schools has destroyed a slice of common ground that has been recognized for generations. That is, a system of public schools that promises to bind us together as a nation – even as we fight to make them better. Troubled as the New Orleans Public School system was before Katrina, what has taken its place promises only to further segregate the city’s students – by race, by class, by disability, by talents and interests and gifts. No doubt some of these new independent schools will thrive and will build a base of public support and long waiting lists. Others will fail, either because of mismanagement or poor academic

Fall, 2006

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

reconvened a small core of teachers, graduates, parents, and students in October, 2005. Together, they committed to working for the re-establishment of a neighborhood-based public school structure. SAC's initial work was to plan for ways to support displaced students and encourage them to come back to the city, and to plan for work in neighborhood schools, as they opened.

During the Spring of 2006, Students at the Center and the Douglass Community Coalition offered resources and support to the public secondary schools operated by the Orleans Parish School Board. These educational efforts continued in the context of broader community-based work with the Douglass Community Coalition, and placed special emphasis on linking school and community development.

Starting in January, SAC taught five classes at McMain Unified Secondary School, located in the more populated uptown section of the city, and the first of two public, open admissions secondary schools to reopen in New Orleans. Classes and workshops were held throughout the summer of 2006, as Students at the Center has continued to pull together and

—continued on the following page



ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/BONNIE JACOBS

Fall, 2006 (continued)

activate a growing number of students, former students, teachers and community residents.

In fall 2006, SAC continues to teach classes at McMinn and to involve students and graduates of New Orleans Public Schools in the work of providing high quality education to all students. SAC and the Douglass Community Coalition continue to be involved with Douglass High School, where SAC began offering classes when the school reopened on September 7, 2006. ●

*Across the country the same “reformers” that engineered the dismantling of New Orleans’ schools **are working with almost matched intensity to do the same elsewhere.***

results, and cast their students out yet again to find somewhere else to learn. And almost assuredly, those children left behind, by virtue of their still condemned houses, their under-resourced parents or their individual needs, will continue to suffer because the market requires some to succeed and others to fail. The real vision – the real new paradigm – must be the old one: that a system of public schools, supported and embraced by the public, is the best way to provide all our young people with a quality education, at the same time that we build quality citizens and a common bond that transcends race and class and serves to unite a nation. Market-based schools will never do that.

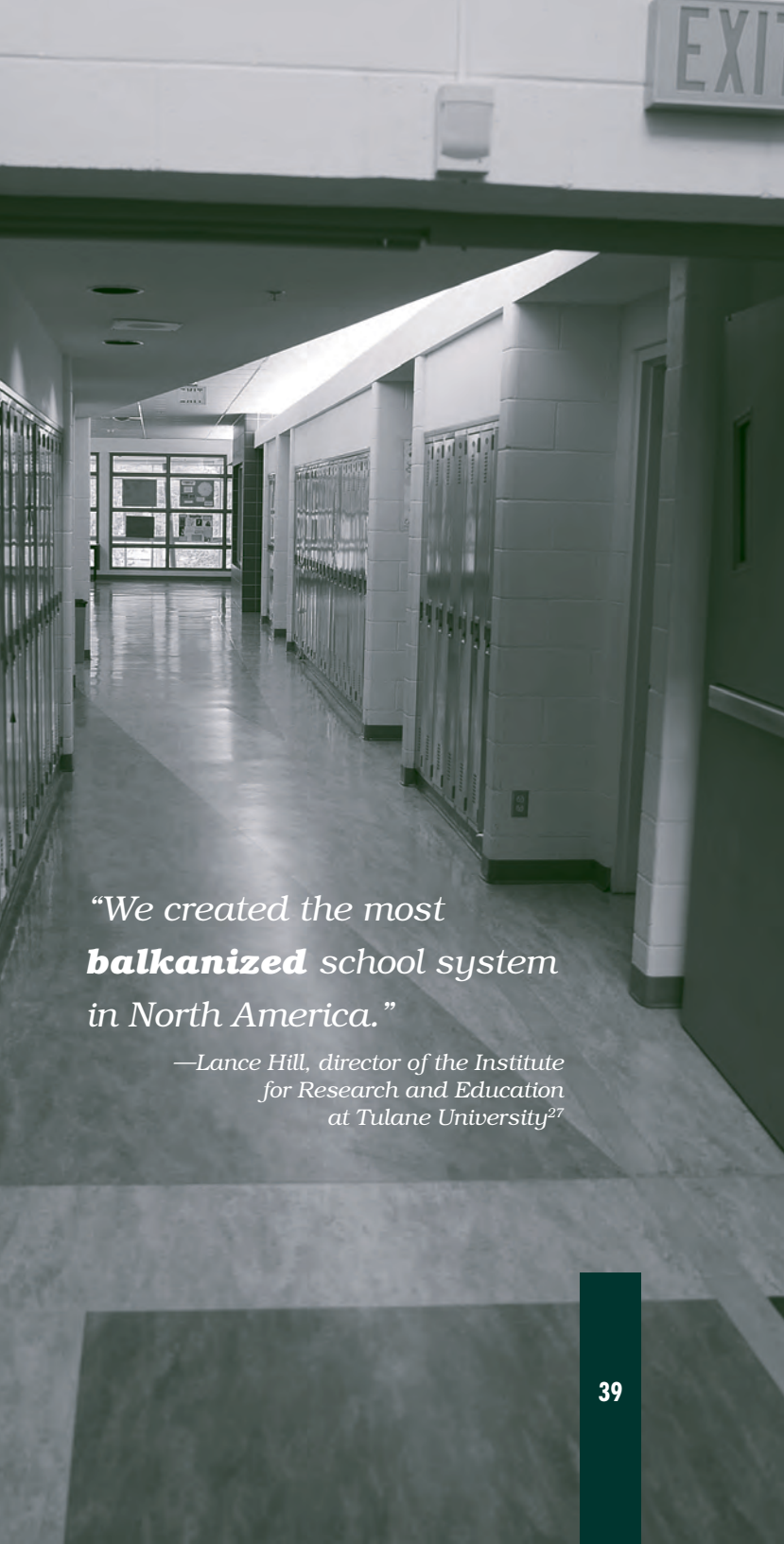
The students and teachers of Students at the Center embrace this role of a public school system. What is most uplifting about their writings is the ease with which they acknowledge the gift of diversity – the honoring of community. These are very astute observers. And they are not alone in recognizing what’s happening to their neighbors, their friends and their community.

The dismantling of the New Orleans public schools has allowed us to witness a radical transformation of American public education in a single city in a single year. But this transformation is not confined to the Crescent City. Across the country the same “reformers” that engineered the dismantling of New Orleans’ schools are working with almost matched intensity to do the same elsewhere. As in New Orleans, universal access is disappearing into networks of schools that can and do shape their student bodies; that are minimally accountable to society as a whole, and that further sort, separate and pick apart community. These schools continue to receive substantial public and private funding, while traditional public school districts struggle. We believe the implications of this trend are evident in New Orleans. It would be a mistake to ignore them. It would be a travesty to ignore the words of the young people and dedicated teachers that call us to a loftier vision.

September, 2006

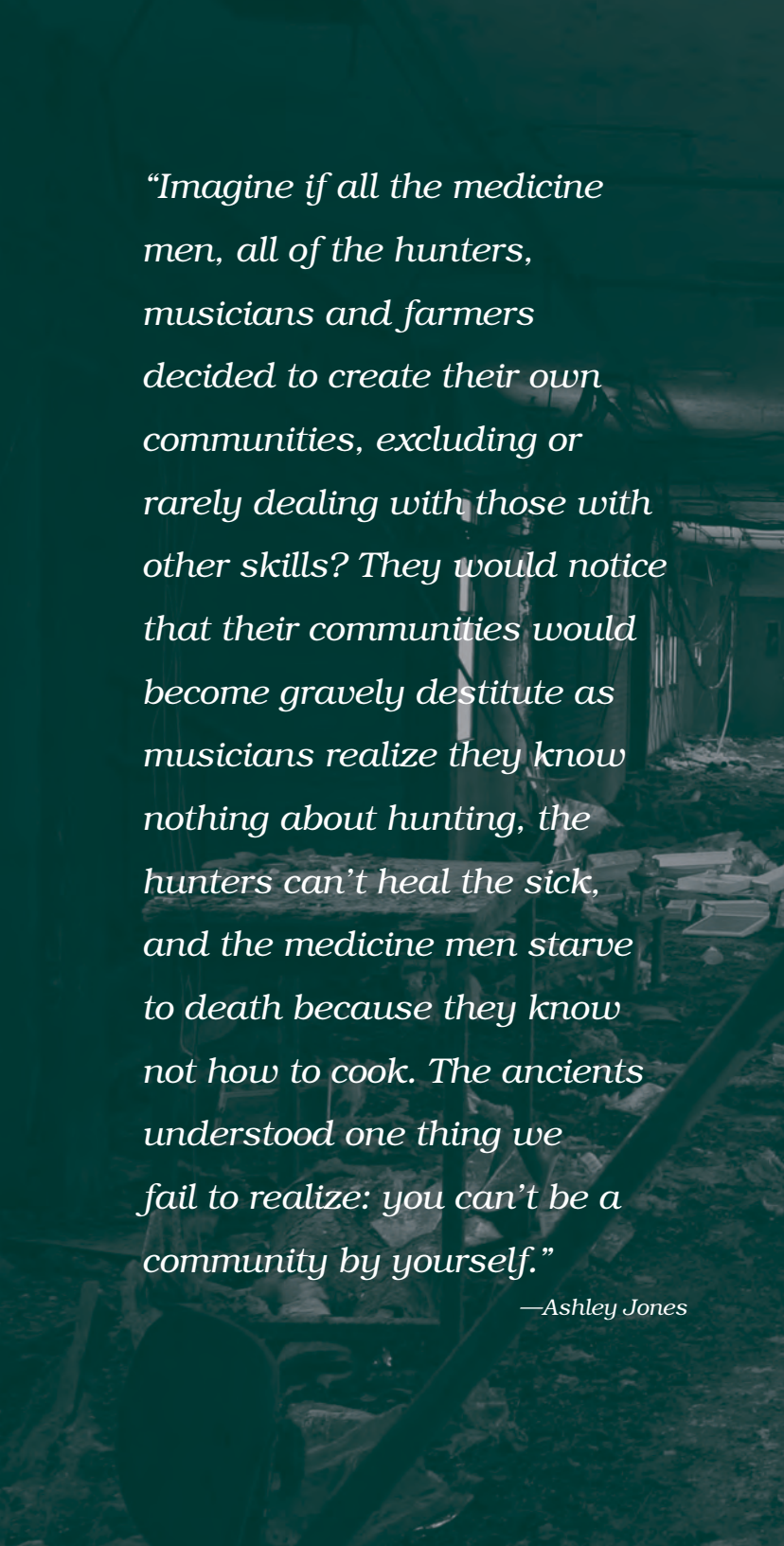
Endnotes

- 1 Local 527 has been an important bastion of democracy in New Orleans. AFT Local 527 was established in 1937 to represent Black teachers in the city and to fight for equal pay. For decades, separate Black and white teacher unions fought for the right to bargain collectively. But they did not have the power to win until they came together in 1972 to form United Teachers of New Orleans. The merged union represented the first integrated union of educators in the south, and the only time that an all-Black organization in the south had become integrated by accepting whites into its fold.
In 1974 the UTNO became the first teacher union in the Deep South to gain collective bargaining rights. In the decades that followed, UTNO became a political power in the city, and an increasingly strong local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers.
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“We created the most
balkanized school system
in North America.”

—Lance Hill, director of the Institute
for Research and Education
at Tulane University²⁷



“Imagine if all the medicine men, all of the hunters, musicians and farmers decided to create their own communities, excluding or rarely dealing with those with other skills? They would notice that their communities would become gravely destitute as musicians realize they know nothing about hunting, the hunters can’t heal the sick, and the medicine men starve to death because they know not how to cook. The ancients understood one thing we fail to realize: you can’t be a community by yourself.”

—Ashley Jones

Contributors

Christopher Burton, the 2005 salutatorian of Frederick Douglass High School in New Orleans, serves as a staff member for Students at the Center, coordinating youth organizing activities in New Orleans and representing SAC in national initiatives, such as the youth forum of the Quality Education as a Civil Right campaign. Christopher recently completed an intensive two-week writing project for the community workshop at the Andover Bread Loaf School of English, with teachers from Oakland, New Orleans and Lawrence Mass. He is entering his sophomore year at the University of New Orleans and plans to be a public school teacher.

Keva Carr graduated from Frederick Douglass High School in May, 2005. She is just beginning her sophomore year at Northwestern Louisiana University. Keva, who took her first Students at the Center class at Thurgood Marshall Middle School in New Orleans, has won state-wide writing awards, participated in writing exchanges with students in New Mexico and New Jersey, and has co-facilitated writing workshops for teachers in Greenville, South Carolina and New Orleans.

Adriane Frazier has been part of Students at the Center for 9 years, since her sophomore year at McDonogh 35 High School in New Orleans. A 2005 graduate of Howard University, Adriane now works with Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies on partnerships with Students at the Center on youth media, leadership, and sexual health through funding from the Centers for Disease Control.

Maria Hernandez took her first Students at the Center class at Douglass her sophomore year, following in the footsteps of her older brother Juan and older sister Amelia. Maria served as lead writer on the Plessy Civil Rights Park Project, collaborating with visual artist John Scott on bringing student writings about social justice in New Orleans to life. As a high school student, Maria won state-wide writing contests, published her historical writings in LOUISIANA

WEEKLY, wrote and performed plays on teen issues and historical incidents, and served on local and national youth organizing committees.

Katrena Jackson-Ndang taught in a bi-lingual school in Cameroon for 13 years before she began her teaching career in New Orleans Public Schools, primarily at Alfred Lawless in the lower 9th ward. Katrena is an active member of Christian Unity Baptist Church and serves as Vice President for High Schools for United Teachers of New Orleans and Vice President for the Louisiana Federation of Teachers. Katrena has represented the American Federation of Teachers in national civil rights conferences and international task forces on African labor and human rights movements.

Ashley Jones is a nine-year member of Students at the Center, dating back to her 10th grade year at McDonogh 35 High School. A 2005 graduate of Clark Atlanta University, Ashley is now a staff member of Students at the Center and principal member of the Listen to the People project, an oral history archive of New Orleans after Katrina. In fall 2006, Ashley will run a community-based media and technology center for Students at the Center to develop digital media production opportunities for St. Claude Avenue area residents and for the students and families she works with in school-based residencies.

Jim Randels is a graduate, parent, and 20-year veteran teacher in the New Orleans Public Schools. He co-directs (with Kalamu ya Salaam), the Students at the Center program, which recently was awarded funding from Open Society Institute for youth media work, Vanguard Public Foundation for education reform work through classroom practice, and National Science Foundation to work with the Algebra Project to develop instructional materials rooted in student experiences and stories. Randels was named teacher of the year in New Orleans in 1998-9 and has served on the Executive Council of United Teachers of New Orleans (AFT Local 527) since 2000.

The Center for Community Change

For nearly 40 years, the Center for Community change has earned a national reputation for building the power and capacity of low income people, especially low income people of color, to organize and advocate for social change, economic justice, and political participation.

Each year the Center provides practical help and policy support to numerous low-income grassroots groups in almost every state, so they can serve as vehicles of power and progress in their communities. We help grassroots groups to develop the skills, strategies and alliances they need to engage in local and national public policy debates on key issues affecting their everyday lives: e.g. housing, jobs, welfare reform, voting rights, community reinvestment, education, transportation, and immigration.

Unlike many national organizations, the Center has strong roots and relationships in urban and rural low-income communities around the country that are home to people of every race. We have developed an extraordinary record of creating and supporting grassroots organizations through comprehensive technical assistance, and bringing those organizations together to achieve a significant impact on communities and public policies. Our bedrock conviction is that major social change will occur only if grassroots organizations have the capacity, relationships and sophistication to lead the effort.

The Center's Education Team works specifically with grassroots organizing groups across the country, that are struggling to improve public schools. The team's quarterly newsletter, *Education Organizing*, reports on those struggles, and links groups to federal policy information as well as to each other. It is available at the Team's website, www.communitychange.org/issues/education.

Additional Contact Information and Resources

Students at the Center

c/o the Renaissance Project
4300 Dumaine Street
New Orleans, LA 70119
www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/literacy/sac

For additional information on SAC, see:
<http://segue.middlebury.edu/index.php?action=site&site=TrackingStorm>

Frederick Douglass

Community Coalition
c/o Crescent City Peace Alliance
1830 St. Roch Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70117

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\$3.00 over 30 copies (plus postage)

Everyone in my neighborhood doesn't watch your back or anything. I guess they're too busy dealing with their own crazy agendas. Ms. Ella Rose, who's lived there since I have, lives in a double house next to her daughter and grandchild. Ms. Ella Rose is nice, well when she wants to be. It's like she has two personalities. She speaks one day, and when she and the rest of the old ladies sit and rock on the porch, I think they talk about everybody. Her daughter Cheryl is the same way. She has a cat for a daughter. Sneaky as the day is long. I often wonder if she knows her daughter has an exposed reputation or dislikes me because every now and then I get harassed by the boys who work at the rental service parallel to my house. 19, 20, and 21 year-olds wasting their time hoping to catch a glimpse of me walking in or out of my house. On this steaming August day, surrounded by the buzz of excited conversation, sweaty foreheads and eager faces, I'm glad to be bringing my siblings to our neighborhood school rather than running away from it. And for their sake and the sake of all the other 9th graders, it's important for me to be on time.

One reason I'm on time and at Douglass is because of Frederick Douglass, like Frederick Douglass knew, that none of us can be free unless all of our people are free. My education isn't just for me. It is also for my fellow students.

But I love passing through that block just to see Ms. Harrison's beautiful flowers blooming in the sun, and I always say I'm going to make me some roses, but never do. I love when it rains in my neighborhood. My porch is made just right, so I can stand on my red stairs and let the rain just fall on my face. The rain hits the grass that everyone keeps cut, and when it gets dark, the big trees look like giants in the night. As I watched the news, my eyes became a waterfall, and the waterfall wouldn't stop. It just got full until it made several individual puddles of waterfalls on my small desk. I saw that New Orleans residents had nothing, nothing but their lives. And as we were exploited on NBC, CNN, etc. I saw that they were fighting for that. How could a heart be so cold? How could a soul be so black? How can someone see people in a need of my hard staring eyes I could change everything. Before I thought about the place I used to get my chicken sandwiches from on Freret St. or Ms. Sadie the iceberg lady right off of LaSalle St in the 3rd, I saw Maria and Rodneka, Earlnika, Keva, and Daniel. I thought about Douglass High School and the gloomy hallways that always made me feel that I was in a scary movie or something. I wondered what would be next for them, no longer having Students at the Center (SAC). I thought about the schools they may be forced to go to, those cold, stiff rooms where the real world never becomes part of the lesson plan. Where kids like me and nameless others grow irritated when we think of the real world waiting to suck us up in a vortex just right outside.

Although I didn't initially understand some of my family's resentment of the high school I chose to attend, somehow I did feel like I was a part of the abandonment of not just those in my family but in my community. I understood that my education was somewhat better than theirs, but why? Whenever I walked into my cousin Eddie's room when he was doing homework, he would stop immediately and throw his books aside. I knew he was having trouble, because his mother told me so. Even though we were cousins, for some strange reason the fact that he attended Carver, a "low performing school" and I McDonogh # 35, made it hard for him to come to me for help even when I was clearly offering my services.

When Katrina hit New Orleans, I was two weeks into my senior year at Frederick Douglass Senior High School. My friends and I were frantically trying to keep our school from closing. Douglass was one of the lowest ranking schools in the district, so the state, using its accountability plan, was trying to shut it down or take it over. We were running a campaign called Quality Education as a Civil Right, doing our part in this one-year-old national campaign by continuing the work we had been doing at Douglass: involving more parents and students and community members in working together to improve the school and to demand all the resources we needed to do that.

My suspicion of malice came true my 5th grade year at an awards ceremony. Every time I walked onto the stage to receive an award, I got booed. Maybe the crowd all knew that I had cheated. I had received aid and attention that should have been directed also at the children more in need of it than me. After that night, having been booed in front of my sister and grandma and having almost cried, I developed modesty. Knowing that I was not the average student, I tried to become the average student.

The sun wrapped itself around me, each ray a ribbon of heat with its stubborn Southern grip. It was pretty warm for a February evening. I had driven the whole day from Atlanta with the windows down. The air was thick and heavy, the smell of death suspended. Abandoned cars dotted long stretches of highway whispering tales of past lives. Crumbled cypress and mangled iron were swept into the streets, and dreams were carried off into the wind and scattered. I wonder what happens to a tree when it is uprooted. Is it dead forever? Or do the roots go so deep that once toppled it can grow again, even if only beneath the surface, hidden from sight? My mind drifts when fatigue finds love in humidity. I had after all been driving for over seven hours. I found myself back home, back in New Orleans. But it wasn't my beloved where I could lose myself in Louie's trumpet song. I used to bathe in magnolia-scented water and fantasize about long pirogue rides down bayous where moss would stretch out its fingers to caress my shoulders. Instead it was empty, fragile, and anemic. No longer an elder of Creole antiquity, it seemed infantile and helpless. I drove down that were starved of sound, of any life at all, and an to wonder why I had me me back. Why would I

