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Soul survival

By Christine Wiltz

August 20, 2006 *in print edition M-1*

THE OTHER EVENING, I watched a TV news report about an elderly couple who had spent nearly the entire year since Hurricane Katrina living in their garage behind their flood-ravaged house in New Orleans' 9th Ward. The garage miraculously stood upright, its walls unfinished. A couple of pots were arranged on the floor under roof leaks. There was no door. The couple had stacked their meager belongings neatly in the back of the garage. They spent most of the year gutting their house, and the man had fixed the roof of the garage as well as he could.

Newspeople arrived to watch the couple enter their new trailer from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for the first time, a trailer they had requested 10 months ago and which was delivered three weeks shy of the storm's first anniversary, Aug. 29. If viewers expected anger at the government for the long delay or righteous indignation over the way the couple had lived during those agonizing months, they would have to supply that themselves.

The couple walked toward the trailer not quite knowing what to expect. When they saw the kitchen's bright white cabinets, the stove and refrigerator, they broke into wide, beaming smiles. "Oh," the woman said quietly to her husband, "I'll be able to cook again." He nodded his appreciation for that and opened the refrigerator. "And a big icebox," he told her.

This is the kind of help that I and other New Orleans residents have come to expect from the government; what passes for progress. For this couple, though, the FEMA trailer, a comfortable place to live, means real progress toward getting their house finished.

Progress can't happen quickly enough. In the most devastated areas of New Orleans, people want the rubble removed and city services restored. They want to know if the levees are going to hold next year, and their anxiety level increases daily as we enter the peak of hurricane season knowing that they won't hold this year. They want to know what's going to happen to their property.

Even in the Uptown neighborhood, where things appear normal and for the most part are, people live with the fear of the unknown, worrying about their schools and the medical establishment; they put up with inconveniences such as long waits for doctors, fewer grocery stores, shorter business hours and frequent power outages. Where will we be next year? What about next month? Is the city going to make it?

The one group of people who don't seem in the least concerned about questions like these are the young adults who have stayed in New Orleans. The ones I know wouldn't think of living anywhere else. They love the city deeply, and their goal is nothing short of saving it. I see it in their eyes, the way I felt when I used to walk through the

streets of the French Quarter when I was twentysomething: love, pride and possession. Oh, yes, I owned it. All I wanted to do was write about the city, put my mark on it and show it for the unique and beautiful place where I was lucky enough to have been born.

The young people I know in New Orleans are putting their mark on the city as well. They are starting businesses. One young man has two, his web-design business and, since the storm, a T-shirt business. He has fun coming up with witty, poignant messages to put on the shirts and invites his friends to design and word the shirts as well. Some of my favorites: "I Am New Orleans," "Be a New Orleanian Wherever You Are," "Premium NOLA – Made with Soul" and "The Beauty of Entropy." A young woman I know is also making her mark, creating an e-commerce site to highlight artists, designers, musicians, writers and other artisans, all local. These young people are choosing the Internet to spread the word to the rest of the world the fastest way they can – and give access to the spirit, the very soul, of the city.

And so, a year after Katrina, New Orleans straddles the devastation with one foot in the land of opportunity and one in the swamp of inertia. By habit, residents view change in their city warily. The past is forever present in the old river town, and embedded in its history – of which its food, music, diverse culture and way of life are all a part – is a quality that many people see as New Orleans' most valuable. It's called soul, and residents would argue that it is the city's richest resource. You could say that in New Orleans the bottom line is calculated in soul, and that makes it an equal contender with progress.

As hard as change can be to accept, there is no going back. A year later, nobody really knows how much progress is being made, or how much and in what ways the city has changed. In the mayoral race in April, residents voted to give Mayor C. Ray Nagin a second chance. He won by a surprising 5,000 votes, which analysts found had been cast in the largely white Uptown area, the very Uptowners the mayor had disparaged in his infamous "we will be a chocolate city" speech. They voted for the status quo.

But there is no status quo any longer. The landscape has changed, and the people and city along with it. The narrative also has changed. As a writer, I see no point in telling stories that take place before Katrina. The 19th century novel I was working on will have to wait; it just isn't pertinent at the moment. I see a new narrative of the city beginning with these young people who carry on without any doubt, without fear of the unknown and who see the uncertainty of the times as an opportunity.

As for the soul of the city, all of us laugh at the notion that it's endangered or that a storm could blow it away. We know. We're here.

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