

A Teacher and a Lawyer Walk into a Hippie Tent

The eeriest thing was the stillness. Especially at night when there should have been bugs and frogs singing all around, we would lie in our tent and listen to the silence. There were no birds to wake us up in the morning, only the sounds of people wrestling pots and pans, preparing breakfast. In the middle of a once-vibrant parish just outside New Orleans proper, it was too quiet.

This was six months after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, six months after the levees failed and stormwater rushed through streets, over and into homes, businesses, and hospitals. New Orleans filled up like a bowl. The water fast became a toxic stew of lake water, industrial runoff, fossil fuels, and sewage. Over Labor Day weekend 2005, from our home in Washington, DC, we watched news coverage in horror as people were rescued—or worse, waited to be rescued—off rooftops and trees, dazed and sunburned, while dead bodies and cars floated down neighborhood streets.

Six months after the storm, we—Liz McCartney, middle-school teacher and executive director of a technology learning lab, and Zack Rosenburg, criminal defense lawyer for the indigent—still had those images seared into our brains, and we felt like we had to do something. Liz emailed 20 groups involved in the recovery effort, offering our help, and heard back from just one. We made plans to take a short leave from our jobs and our lives to go do whatever we could. It was a decision that would upend our lives and our ideas about what was possible or practical.

As it turns out, helping people recover from a disaster is both easier and far more complicated than we could have ever imagined. And yet, like any human endeavor, recovery is a series of processes that can be improved or radically reimagined to better serve people. But first, we had to find out what we did not know.

Liz went first. During the 17-hour drive down to Louisiana, she second-guessed our decision. She wasn't afraid of hard work. But the storm was six months past, and the national news had largely moved on. An Egyptian passenger ferry had sunk in the Red Sea, killing more than 1,000 people. The Winter Olympics were about to begin in Turin, Italy. Sometimes there were reports about trouble with response of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the hurricane's path, but the major coverage seemed to be winding down. After all, 19 of her emails had gone unanswered. Liz wondered whether help was still needed.

She pulled into the city after dark and went straight to her hotel in the French Quarter. The narrow brick streets had been spared the flood, but bars and restaurants were still subdued. Liz saw a tree uprooted and lying across a sidewalk, which was odd. Surely that was the kind of storm damage that would have been cleared away months ago. Had something else happened more recently?

Early the next morning, she started across town to the relief organization and immediately came across a massive fire burning on St. Claude Avenue, forcing her to redirect through neighborhoods she did not know. From the Upper Ninth Ward and across the Industrial Canal to the Lower Ninth Ward, block after block of utter ruin slipped past her windshield. There were cars on top of houses and houses on top of cars. One house was splayed open, split like a piece of overripe fruit, with personal possessions spilling toward the street and flapping in the light breeze.

There were endless piles of debris in front of houses, in vacant lots, and at the ends of streets as if pushed there by a snowplow. Much of it was covered with a kind of thick, furry blanket. The blanket consisted of shredded clothes, splintered wood, insulation, and who knows what else, all fused together with mildew that had dried out and rewetted with every passing rain for half a year. Long-existing landmarks had disappeared under this furry camouflage. New landmarks appeared: a 30-foot fishing boat resting on its side in a residential neighborhood; a house in the Lower Ninth Ward with all its walls, roof, and furniture blown out and washed away—all that remained was a lone toilet on a cement slab.

Liz kept driving east along the north shore of the Mississippi River until she reached Chalmette, where a few relief organizations had set up tents to help feed the storm refugees, providing food to areas without operating grocery stores or restaurants. Chalmette is the parish seat of St. Bernard Parish, home to 60,000 people (pre-flood). Six months after the storm, there were just five businesses open: a gas station, a car wash, a hair salon, a barbershop, and a local bar. In the middle, there were a few clusters of big tents that made up the odd collection of relief efforts.

There was the Blackwater complex run by the federal government's security contractors, best known for providing extra armed personnel for the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. After Katrina passed through, Blackwater forces were hired for private security jobs. Then the company secured a contract offering relief services. To get into its tented compound, you had to pass through metal detectors and pat-down searches. People looking for a hot meal had to leave their oyster knives outside.

Nearby was the religious tent. This was staffed by people from all over the country, organized by their churches back home to

spend a week or two in New Orleans, to help feed and comfort people wounded by tragedy.

And then there was what everyone called the hippie tent, organized by people affiliated with the Rainbow Family. It is an understatement to say that the people staffing this giant, geodesic, dome-like structure were eclectic. There were hippies in flowing skirts and beards, working class tradespeople, and suburban soccer moms all serving side-by-side. A man with an eye patch worked beside college kids and recently returned veterans, because everyone was just there to help.

Outside of New Orleans, the Rainbow Family was best known for holding enormous annual gatherings in national parks devoted to meditations for peace and wild dancing, exploring new-age ideas and psychedelics. They had no leaders or spokespeople or official organizational structure, yet they held these summer gatherings every year that lasted about a month and attracted 10,000–20,000 people. Employees of the National Park Service have said that when this gathering—the size of a small city—left a campground, you could not tell that they had been there.

Over the years, Rainbow Family members had developed some expertise in cooking for masses of people, setting up mobile kitchens and health clinics, and creating both supply and distribution networks. They put those skills to use in New Orleans, setting up camps in Chalmette and Marginy, often teaming up with religious groups to make use of uneven resources. They did such a good job that the United Way agreed to fund their efforts, and so, six months after the storm, the Rainbow Family was still there, putting out three hot, delicious meals a day—usually bean intensive—fueled by volunteers who camped out behind the makeshift kitchen. That was where Liz pitched her tent.

After a week, Zack joined Liz in the tent. And then Liz's newly retired mother, Marion McCartney, came down and pitched a tent beside ours. Our days fell into a simple rhythm, rising at 5 a.m. to help in the kitchen, serving meals to people, and then sitting with them and talking. They came to the hippie tent for food but also to be surrounded by something other than FEMA trailers and damaged or gutted homes. People needed a spark of humanity and to connect with others.

Some people were shell-shocked and quiet. But most wanted to talk, to tell their stories in order to preserve their identities. These were people who had built their own lives, done for themselves, and been productive members of St. Bernard Parish or the Ninth Ward before Katrina whipped through and took so much away. We cannot recall a single person asking for help. They told stories, traded updates on family members and neighbors, and passed along any information they had on FEMA activities and rebuilding efforts.

We made friends and were invited into people's homes. We stood in gutted shells and, more frequently, in homes not yet gutted where you could still see a thick band of black mold growing up the living room wall, crawling over family photos to the high-water line. To take the place of missing and damaged roofs, FEMA had distributed tens of thousands of huge blue tarps to homeowners, so most of our conversations took place in this watery blue light in sagging rooms filled with the stench of mold and whatever else the black water had left behind.

We talked about rebuilding and about family. Contractors were hard to find, and not all of them were honest. Lots of people did not have enough or the right kind of insurance. Often, if they had insurance against water damage, their claims would get turned down because inspectors said the damage was due to wind. Sometimes it was the other way around.

Beyond the destruction and loss, we began hearing another common story. People were suffering because Katrina had dismantled their support networks. Nearly everyone we met had grown up in St. Bernard Parish or the City of New Orleans and lived within a few blocks of family. Before, when bad or challenging things happened, people turned to a sibling or aunt or cousins or in-laws. But now those homes were destroyed too, and people had fled to Baton Rouge or Houston. The people still in the parish or New Orleans six months after the storm were often alone for the first time in their lives.

Like Mr. Andre. We first met Mr. Andre in the hippie tent, where he was a regular. A very tall man, Mr. Andre had the kind of proud bearing that made you forget about the walker that he used to get from the food line to the communal tables. He would wave off any offers to help carry his food tray but was happy to sit and chat about his family, his career, and his community before the storm. He was at the hippie tent for every single meal.

Mr. Andre was a veteran of WWII and wore one of those trucker hats with a padded front and mesh back; his service pins and medals adorned the front. When he came home from Germany after the war, he found a job as a steel worker and made a good living. He married, sent his children to college, and paid off his house. He did not have insurance because he did not live in a mandatory flood insurance zone—there was “no need.”

Long after the dinner service wrapped up, he would sit at one of the tables drinking coffee and chatting. More often than not, one of us would join him just for the pleasure of his company in those long, quiet nights before we crawled into our cold tents and sleeping bags.

Early one morning, we walked into the meal tent and saw Mr. Andre sobbing. His shoulders shaking over a cup of coffee at his usual table, he finally choked out a few words. It was this painful,

predictable routine that finally got to him, he said, with no end in sight. Every morning he had breakfast with us at the hippie tent. Then he got into his blue Ford Ranger pickup truck, drove over to the FEMA office, and waited in line to ask for a trailer to live in. A clerk would tell him there were no trailers, and he would leave there and come back to have lunch with us. After lunch, he would go back to FEMA and wait in the same line. He asked the same question and got the same answer.

Mr. Andre ate dinner late and spent long hours lingering at the table. He was always one of the last to leave, and we wondered why. On that sad morning we discovered the answer. Each night he delayed the moment when he would drive back to the FEMA lot and try to sleep in the back of his truck. That was how he had been living for three months.

Mr. Andre was in his mid- or late 80s. His back bowed when he was tired, and his hands shook sometimes. That morning, he told us through his tears about Germany, where he had served just after WWII ended. So many people there were living in abject poverty, scrapping together supplies for bread and soup in bombed-out cities. But the worst part, they told him, was that they felt forgotten. The world had moved on and abandoned them to their fates with no clear path forward. Mr. Andre finally understood what that meant, to be in misery and forgotten.

Burrowed deep into our sleeping bags that night, we agonized over what we could do to help him and wondered how many more Mr. Andres there were out there.

Days later, we finally gave in to our own physical discomfort and got a hotel room for the night, giving Marion the hot shower she had been yearning for. While she went to bed early, we took a walk through the French Quarter and Marginy. Our time was nearly up, but we were having a hard time thinking about going back to

DC. We loved our lives there; we each had work that was important and fulfilling. But there was an immediate, unmet, and profoundly human need in Louisiana.

Finally it was Zack who said, “We have to come back and do something. We can’t just leave.” Liz listed a series of concerns, but her heart was not in any pushback. A day later, we committed.

Of course, we were imagining something rational, like finding a more substantial way to help and spending a year in New Orleans. We started talking to people. In the Katrina disaster zone, you got to know the real power brokers pretty quickly. We had already met most of them. So we found the local leaders of national organizations and on-the-ground FEMA representatives and asked, “What’s the plan? What’s the next step in rebuilding?”

The plan, we heard, was first to gut all the houses. In an operation that would last more than a year, teams of people would move through—house after block after parish—and systematically gut one house after another. So a block that got gutted at the beginning of the effort would just sit there, until the last house was gutted a dozen miles away. We were repeatedly told that this is how recovery had been done for 30 years. Why change? Rebuilding was phase three and could not be started until after phases one and two were done.

While we may not have recognized it at the time, this was our first introduction to the human toll and systematic inefficiency that occur when fidelity to process outweighs measuring what matters. We saw a system designed in theory for success; unfortunately, success was defined by following a process, not achieving results that matter to people.

It is difficult, still, to imagine the scale of the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. Eighty percent of New Orleans was underwater in the days after the storm; 1,577 people died. In St. Bernard Parish, the municipality that includes Chalmette, 95% of the housing units were damaged, equaling more than 25,000 homes.

At the time, we knew nothing about the difference between batch-versus-flow operations, but we knew instinctively that first gutting every last house was wrong. We had talked to enough people and spent time on enough blocks to know that places did not come back to life until someone returned home. People might drive past their old house to look, but they did not stop unless they saw a neighbor, some human activity, and a reason to justify their hopes.

We believed that we could make a big difference in the time line, but we were not entirely sure where to put our energies first. So, we went home to DC and held a fundraiser while we made plans. A few weeks later, Mr. Andre called to report that he was finally getting his FEMA trailer delivered to the front of his ruined house.

We continued packing up our apartment and arranged to be absent from our jobs for extended periods.

Mr. Andre called again, this time weakened and in despair. After a couple of weeks in the FEMA trailer, for which he had no keys, he had terrible diarrhea and the toilet was backed up. We made some calls on his behalf and felt an even deeper urge to be on the ground as soon as possible.

Finally, with a minivan full of donated and borrowed tools—most of which we did not know how to use—we returned to New Orleans on June 1, 2006 to set up shop.

We found our first clients, Joey and Melody Ladapie, on referral from George Barasich, head of the local fishermen's union, whom we had met in the hippie tent. We got volunteers from Craigslist,

walked into the Ladapies' 1,300-square-foot brick ranch house in St. Bernard Parish, and felt a pang of doubt. We did not really know what we were doing. But they needed help and we were determined.

The house had already been gutted, so we got to work cutting and hanging Sheetrock on the bare framing. Over the next few weeks, we screwed in drywall, applied a layer of mud over it,¹ and painted every wall and ceiling. When we were done, the Ladapies thanked us profusely and then said, "Go to the next family. We'll take it from here."

Seeing the confidence in their faces, we saw our path. We wrote up a business plan showing that with \$50,000, we could install new Sheetrock walls and ceilings, all painted, for 20 families. Based on that plan, Gary Ostroske, the CEO of the United Way of Southeast Louisiana, took a chance and funded our efforts.

We started out doing one house at a time, adding in plumbing and electrical work as needed. But we were inundated with requests for help and quickly moved to have several sites running at the same time. How best to do that is a challenge we have been solving and re-solving ever since.

Still, there were more clients—more people like Mr. Andre whose health and prospects became more fragile the longer they lived in precarious situations with no clear path home. For too many people, running between service agencies, insurers, and government agencies trying to coordinate money and construction help was a frustrating full-time job.

So we created an all-under-one-roof model where clients would not have to run from one agency to the next, learning how to apply for all kinds of government-sponsored aid. Though relatively small-

1. Also known as joint compound, this is the layer that gives walls the plaster-like texture while protecting the underlying Sheetrock.

scale, we focused on giving clients predictability, reliability, and, perhaps most important, a central point of contact. We recruited volunteers, performed case management, raised funds, did construction, and pulled permits on our clients' behalf.

Clients now had a one-stop shop. We became better at hiring and managing plumbers, electricians, HVAC contractors, and roofers; at eradicating mold, efficiently applying mud to drywall, and finding corporate sponsorship. We tapped into sources for volunteers and learned to manage all that casual labor and keep it coordinated with the tradespeople. With essential support from AmeriCorps, thousands of volunteers from across the country, and sponsorship from Entergy, Shell, United Way, and many generous individuals, St. Bernard Project—SBP—was born.

By October 2007, 16 months after arriving in town with our borrowed tools, we had celebrated homecomings for 88 families. Meanwhile, the official Long-Term Recovery Committee—in which separate groups handled case management, fundraising, gutting, rebuilding, and volunteer coordination—had managed to secure funding to begin rebuilding on only 13 homes. We became convinced we had found the right way to help people.

Mr. Andre finally made it out of his FEMA trailer and into his house with help from other contractors. But sadly, he seemed to lose his spirit. He died not long after getting home.

Those first years were filled with wild highs and lows. We found incredibly passionate and committed people to populate our tiny staff, along with big reserves of volunteer labor. We found fellow Americans who were compelled by citizenship and compassion to travel sometimes-long distances to help total strangers. Some were tradespeople who had left their jobs; others were grandparents or professional athletes. All these people were willing to sweat, haul, and build. We were inspired every day by their hard work and

commitment. A pair of students at Loyola University organized their friends to hang Sheetrock on so many weekends that they finally made it official and became the Loyola Shrocking Club. We also found an amazing partnership with AmeriCorps, the federally funded agency that attracts people from all walks of life to improve lives for other Americans.

Sometimes, 30 volunteers would show up on a rainy Saturday to work on a 900-square-foot house. Other times, we worked alone. If one staff person left, we scrambled to fill the gap but lost all the knowledge and skill that person had gained throughout their tenure.

Our numbers improved over time, going from 88 homecomings in 16 months to 100 or more a year. Some houses took far longer than we thought they would or should. We knew we had problems with construction and coordination, but we could not quite identify exactly what those problems were. The questions became urgent when deadlines got pushed and clients' faces dropped in anguish.

Finally, a member of our board of directors offered to introduce us to a very knowledgeable local building consultant. Maybe he could help us improve. We eagerly jumped on the offer and gave this expert a tour of our offices, warehouse, and field operations.

In the world of charity work, it can be difficult to find truth-tellers. People were quick to applaud our efforts and our resilience. It was hard for them to understand that we were not looking for applause and “participant” awards. We judged ourselves by the families we helped and the rate of still-pressing need.

This man seemed to understand that, and we are still grateful for his candor. He sat us down, spread his hands on the table and said, “You’re a mess.”