

Blog Entries from New Orleans
September 29th - October 3rd, 2006
Dean Browell

#1 of 2: “Just A Taste”

So, today was one of the most incredible, soul-wrenching, insanely important days.

Just a few photos to tell part of the story; there are many photos, these are just a few of the people and places near the worksite.



The story of Ida and Carlton Roy... Carlton was a leader in his community. He's 90. Ida is a strong septuagenarian woman who is battling cancer- something she was only recently diagnosed with, after their FEMA trailer came in but not before the news that their entire house had to be gutted. When I say gutted, I mean truly gutted- nothing but the studs. Several feet of standing water (for weeks) and rain that poured through a wind-ripped roof ruined everything. Their only income is from renting half of their duplex, so they have been monetarily paralyzed as well. Ida recounted for us, through a wall of tears that we all hit many times today, seeing her home during one of many visits back- how all the furniture from two families that they had kept and preserved was crushed under the metal claw of the removal crews, from a stack of memories on the street curb.

After a professional sheet rocking team finished this morning with our help, we attacked the house and primed and painted (two coats of the latter) every room with colors Ida chose. Ida valiantly saved some photos of family even though they were mostly ruined--but I have offered to take them back to VA to have Suzie and I work on them to try and restore some memories. I also met their grandson (who they raised) Cedric, who was tearful and so thankful of the 40 people helping to completely rebuild his grandparents home. "My grandmother hasn't smiled for more than a year- until today," he offered to us at the end of a long workday.





We have heard dozens of these stories. Of even relatively high-middle-class New Orleans folk cooped up seven to a room (plus dog) in a Super 8 in Houston. Of some who stayed. Of some who have struggled with normalcy, whatever that looks like now.



But tonight, after eight hours of labor, we also found some respite in good food and music. We caught a great meal at [Jin Jeans](#) followed by Kermit Ruffins new Sunday show in their lounge. Obviously a bit tired from just flying in from Trinidad (Kermit has been quite an ambassador for New Orleans since Katrina, performing far more shows, enough that he's barely kept a regular weekly gig as he usually did a year ago) - Kermit's show still rejuvenated all involved. He bought the entire happy house one drink and later triumphantly questioned then proclaimed, "What is New Orleans? It's the people, it's the life, and it is back." The mostly local crowd of forty agreed. And two from Virginia were happy they did.

#2 of 2: “Red Tape & Rice”

First, a quick story: A house down the street from the Roy's, still on Soniat street, was being worked on by a small crew of contractors. During a break Amanda and I walked down the street and met them. They were completely renewing the inside structure of an old house and were doing well with what little crew they had. One waved to us and we struck up a conversation about the directly behind the one they worked on. It was an absolute disaster- it was so dilapidated and conquered by both the hurricane, a year of collapse, and the complete lack of an entire side of its second floor, that it was amazing it hadn't been demolished yet (it couldn't possibly take long to do the job). The worker explained that the house was in horrible shape, but there was one big problem that really hurt the owner more than the wind damage, the year of leaning, or the flooding... It was the fact that it was on the historical registry.

It was, for better or worse, protected. And that meant that unless there was a fire (wink), the owner had to rebuild it only in retaining what little shape or structure it had left. It would cost twice as much to do that as it would to just doze it and start over. And it makes the parcel of land worthless until he does so. There was no wonder that aside from some haphazard plywood that nothing had been done. A bigger kicker: because of the sprawl of the home's demise, there's not enough land on the parcel to fit a FEMA trailer. "The only thing holding that thing together is red tape."





Ida Roy made for us, in essence, the biggest thank-you meal she could have. While we all underestimated her promise and still had lunch planned to come from elsewhere, Ida fixed a massive lunch for 50 of red beans and rice, incredible sausage, fried chicken, bread, salad, and potato salad. It was a meal that could only be described as hearty, for a hungry and thankful crew that was so proud to be partaking. I spoke to Ida about it, commenting about my grandmother; I mentioned her age (93) and that this meal was very reminiscent of the kind she would have fixed for friends and family-- at least in spirit if not exact recipe. I really, really appreciated it. And Ida teared up more than once trying to express that it was the least she could do.



Later that day I was tasked with touching up the ceiling in what was being used as Ida and Carlton's bedroom in the upstairs. It was a room where the rain hadn't come directly in (some rooms were completely exposed to the elements until recently) but it had some severe discoloration from water damage. I had been dubbed the "ceiling guy" much to my spine's chagrin and in nearly every room in the house had done some if not all the ceiling primer and coats of paint. But in this makeshift bedroom, "our campsite" Ida offered, it



was quiet and not full of the bustle of the other rooms. I draped plastic over much of the room and its contents since the spots were pretty far apart and with a roller and later a small brush and a ladder touched it up as best I could. I was almost done and Ida came in. I offered to leave, but she indicated she just wanted to sit-- and to also get away from the bustle. She was 79 but could pass for more than a decade younger with her shrewd energy and matriarch spirit. She sat and watched me finish. We chatted more. About family. About life. About hope.

Downstairs, their grandson Sedrick spoke candidly as we all dragged into the last hour. He shared with us that friends of his would come from out of town and ask, "Show me the 9th Ward, show me where our people suffered." Sedrick explained that he would show them the 9th Ward, but then he would drive to Lakeside. And the East. And he was very adamant to make the point that this had nothing to do with race. "Everyone suffered. That storm, and those levees, it didn't matter...We're all in trouble."

Two hours later our ride back to a much-sought-after shower and rest was convinced to do some diverting. She took us everywhere. Not just the poor neighborhoods, but also the rich. And then the middle class- what is left of it. Perhaps for all the stories we had seen, all of the special, heart-breaking pictures we took near the Roy's house, we felt like our experience as rebuilders was effective-- potent enough for us to communicate what had happened. We were wrong. I can't believe we took an early picture of the eerie spray-painted "X" on a door, like it was special. We passed thousands of them in this one ride. We passed hundreds of demolished homes. We passed thousands of gutted domiciles. Saw countless scenarios of anguishing heartbreak, implausible destruction, unmatched scenes of difficulty, and dizzying juxtapositions of damage caused by storm, sun, age, politics, and man. We literally found ourselves unable to say, "Oh my God" anymore. Our tears welled up at any turn of the head. Examples ranged from watermarks taller than any man, the buildings knocked like toy brick towers, the renewing spirit of the people of

Broadmoor, the University of New Orleans' faculty/staff housing in ruins, a National Guard unit still on guard at the entrance of a middle-class subdivision far outside the city, entire low-income apartment complexes left as massive skeletons...



We were saturated with sorrow. And the more we tried to categorize the damage in our minds, the more we tried to label or compartmentalize the issues and destruction, the more we tried to Headline News the situation, the less effective it was. We were numb with pain. And we were only witnesses. We were deathly silent for most of the ride back. We were almost unable to make small talk, even if relevant. This had nothing to do with designations or terms. This was about civilization. Humanity.

I realize that it's far easier, and probably more digestible, to get our nuggets of information and feel fed by the newsfeed. But if you take anything from my dribble of thoughts about what has happened in New Orleans- nay, what is STILL happening in New Orleans- is that the story has absolutely nothing to do with the words black, white, rich, poor, upper, lower or middle. It has nothing to do with feeling like we should do right by a city's people because a government any particular level failed them (even if they all did). You need to let your introspection stop plainly at the front door of these tragedies- you shouldn't need to pry further. These are not people somehow classifiable into neat descriptions and they don't deserve to be. They are, flatly: Mothers; Fathers; Brothers; Sisters; Friends; Family. Grandmothers. Daughters. Wives. Husbands. Sons. Grandfathers. Humans. And most importantly, the only thing that mattered in the last whiffs of August and first of September, ALIVE. These are those that did not make the count at the bottom of the sprayed "X" that marks the door of any house in New Orleans. They are still alive.



So much more to say, to think about, to share, and to cry about. But for now I think I've done as much as I can do without shorting out the laptop on which I type. We're home shortly and the brief but potent trip will have come to an end.

But I am branded.