

# Katrina meets tsunami



**The question is whether poor American folks from flooded neighborhoods and public housing projects in New Orleans have anything to share with even poorer fisherfolk from tsunami-hit villages in Thailand and Indonesia?**

*A field visit report of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, written by Somsook Boonyabanha and Thomas Kerr, July 2006*

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Several months back, we got an e-mail from Brad Paul at NPACH, asking for some information about the Asian tsunami, and especially about how communities had been struggling to go back to their ruined villages and rebuild, despite efforts to dispossess them of their land. Brad had been working with community groups and support organizations in New Orleans after the city was devastated and emptied out by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. In the following months, a lively discussion and exchange of news ensued, and finally we decided to visit.



At first, the plan was to make a brief side trip down to New Orleans, from Vancouver, where we were to bring a big team of tsunami survivors from four countries for a seminar in "People-driven disaster rehabilitation" at the World Urban Forum. But first we couldn't get USA visas for any of the community leaders, then Wardah couldn't get a visa, and finally other commitments kept Celine from joining us. So in the end, it was a much-reduced team of only Somsook and Tom (who already had visas!) who visited New Orleans. During a tightly-packed two days, Brad and Sharda showed us around the city and introduced us to several of the communities affected by Hurricane Katrina and their supporters who were working in various ways to reclaim their neighborhoods and city, ten months after the storm. These are our notes from that visit.

The plan now is for NPACH and ACHR to jointly organize an exposure visit of several community leaders from the New Orleans communities to tsunami rehabilitation projects in Thailand and Aceh, some time in September, 2006. Our hosts during the trip :

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## About the storm in New Orleans :

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005, but this historic city escaped the worst wrath of the storm's 200 miles-per-hour winds, which veered past the city. It was only later, when storm surges overwhelmed the system of levees which surround the city (which is mostly built on swampy, low-lying land in the delta of the Mississippi River) that the real devastation began.

**80% of the city was flooded** with a toxic swirl of sewage, chemicals, rats, snakes and bloated corpses – in some areas only 30 cm (like Esplanade), but in other areas, the waters rose 4 - 6 meters, up to roof level (like the Lower 9th Ward and Gentilly).



A couple is rescued from their rooftop after Hurricane Katrina hit, causing flooding in their New Orleans neighborhood, on Monday August 29, 2005.

- **50,000 – 100,000 people stayed in the city**, despite calls for everyone to evacuate. Many of these people were not informed, had no transportation or were elderly or handicapped and could not get out. Buses were supposed to evacuate people, but the drivers fled the city and nobody knew where to catch the buses, so finally, ranks of empty buses stood abandoned on flooded land.
- **News footage showed families huddled on rooftops** and stranded on highway overpasses. Looters stripped stores and houses, while police officers fled the city or stole expensive cars from dealerships, claiming the cars were needed to transport Katrina victims.



- **Public order completely collapsed**, while the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), national, state and local agencies responded to the crisis with ineptness and corruption at almost every level. To people watching the news broadcasts, or living through the nightmare in the city, New Orleans looked more like a war-zone in Iraq than a major American city.
- **About 1,500 people died in New Orleans**, mostly because they were trapped in their houses and drowned when the flood waters rose. Bodies are still being found today.
- **750,000 New Orleans residents are still living as**

**refugees in far-away cities all over the USA**, away from their homes in New Orleans and the gulf area, where the government shipped them right after Katrina. These are "*internally displaced persons*" in the international jargon. The federal government took an unconventional decision to evacuate people in this scattered fashion, and to decentralize the task of taking care of them to dozens of different cities, instead of trying to keep them as close to home as possible. This has made it extremely difficult for survivors to communicate with each other, to organize themselves, to gather and support each other, to know what's going on, or to develop any kind of collective response to the crisis.

- **Huge wastes of money in the decentralized relief process** : For the hurricane refugees stuck in other cities, the FEMA system to support them seems to be to give debit cards or vouchers with limited credit for paying their hotel and food bills. In some cities, FEMA is paying hundreds of dollars a night to pay for rooms in posh hotels or on cruise liners to house Katrina refugees, instead of using all that money to help people return home and start repairing their houses.
- **Electricity wasn't restored until 5 weeks later**, and only then in a few parts of the city. This delay in turning the city's infrastructure systems back on is largely understood now as an overt strategy to keep people from coming back to New Orleans. In the lower Ninth Ward, there is still no electricity or water.



- **200,000 housing units were destroyed in New Orleans city alone.**
- **In the entire Mississippi Delta area, 500,000 housing units were destroyed, so giant shortage of housing.**

- **Not just New Orleans got hit :** Most of the attention after Hurricane Katrina has focused on the city of New Orleans, but actually many smaller towns and rural areas along the Mississippi and Gulf Coast were badly hit – by the storm winds (which blew off roofs and threw cars around), by the tidal surges (big waves) from the sea, and by the flooding afterwards. These places are receiving very little attention from the government or the media. Communities forgotten, very little progress in rebuilding or support to communities there. There was also another storm (Hurricane Rita) that shortly after Katrina devastated rural areas of southwest Louisiana and Texas – but this is the “*forgotten storm*” received little attention from federal policy makers or advocates.
- **Big loss of affordable housing since Katrina :** There are basically three kinds of affordable housing in New Orleans: home ownership, rentals and public housing. All have been seriously hit since the storm. Rents in the city have gone up by at least 35% since the storm, as supply has been slashed.



- **The worst affected were overwhelmingly poor and black :** New Orleans had a pre-storm population of about 460,000 people. Of the 350,000 people who lived in the most damaged neighborhoods of the city, 75% were black, 30% were poor, 53% were renters and at least 10% were unemployed. These are the people who are least likely to have home insurance or the resources to return and rebuild.
- **A poor black city turns affluent and white :** If they don't come back, the demographics of the city will change dramatically (are changing already), from a predominantly poor, black city, to a predominantly affluent white city.
- **Environmental causes of the floods :** Early in the century, many of the bayous and swamps around the city were drained after a yellow-fever epidemic. Later, the gradual filling in and development of wetlands around the city, which used to absorb a lot of the water during flood times and storms, have much reduced the city's natural drains and water-management systems during floods and storms. Also, lots of silting up of the floor of the river and its tributaries, so there is less capacity for water to be carried away to sea. Finally, the levees and man-made protections have not been repaired and invested in properly, after years of federal neglect, even though

many were warning of dangers to the city. The crisis is being called an “*Avoidable disaster, more the fault of man than nature.*”

- **Huge problems of evacuation to nearby cities :** In the city of Baton Rouge, for example, 80 miles towards the northwest, the population has doubled with Katrina refugees, putting a huge strain on the city.
- In the news, even now, the only story is Katrina!

**Sharda tells about the phenomenon of discarded fridges on the street :**

When Sharda first came to visit in October 2006 (six weeks after the storm), the city's streets were lined with piles of discarded refrigerators. During the weeks people were evacuated from the city, the food left in fridges got so spoiled with mold and decomposition that they couldn't be cleaned, but had to be thrown away. So all over the city, piles of refrigerators lined the streets, waiting for the trucks that never came to take them away. Eventually, people discovered these fridges to be a good surface for graffiti messages and public art expressing frustrations with the slow and ineffective relief and rehabilitation process. So there were messages spray-painted on the fridges such as :

- *Gift from FEMA*
- *Dick Cheney Inside*
- *Mail to George Bush, White House*

By Christmas, the fridges still had not been taken away, so good-humored New Orleans residents began stringing Christmas lights and holiday decorations on them, so at night, these curb-side piles became blinking, colorful displays of dark humor.



**Dogs got rescued, but not people:** Apparently the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty towards Animals) was extremely organized, and within days began rescuing and providing first aid and foster homes to hurricane-affected dogs and cats around the city. This level of quick help was not matched when it came to rescuing people.

**Help wanted signs everywhere :** All over New Orleans we see shops and restaurants with “HELP WANTED” signs posted in the windows. Since so many of the city’s lower-income people are still more-less in exile, there is a serious shortage of workers in the city, especially in the service and tourism sectors. So Brad tells us that to get workers, even places like MacDonald’s and Burger King are having to offer salaries of \$10 or \$12 per hour (typical minimum wage jobs, which usually pay only about \$7 or \$8 per hour), and all kinds of fringe benefits, much higher than usual. The irony is, that there are no workers to fill all these openings – because the city’s lower-income population has still not been able to return to the city, no place for them to live. There are increasing numbers of Hispanic (mostly Mexican) workers who are doing a lot of the rebuilding work for contractors – their involvement has been officially supported by George Bush, to the exclusion of local New Orleans workers.



**Advertisements, billboards and posters everywhere around the city offering house gutting and repair assistance.**

**Hard to organize when people are so scattered :** There are renters groups around the city, but they’re not organized, and it’s even harder now, since the storm relief strategy was to ship people all over the country and decentralize the task of taking care of them. (St. Bernard is an example of how much easier it is to organize returning tenants when they all stay together, as in the survivor’s village)

**Public transport in New Orleans :** It was not much of a system before (public buses), and continues to be bad after the storm, doesn’t reach many parts of the city, infrequent buses. The city has been running the

service for free since the storm, but that grant is about to run out.

**A minimal low-income housing unit can be built for \$75,000.** This is an absolute minimum, according to Brad. (single family house or duplex). In New Orleans, not much multi-story housing, it’s mostly 1, 2 and 3-story housing.

**“Katrina Cottages” :** An architect in New York (Maria Casatar?) has come up with a very small, standardized housing unit of about 400 or 500 square feet which can be provided as a “kit” of parts, and can be easily built on any site for about \$40,000, using mostly self-labor. This unit is designed to withstand up to 200 miles per hour winds, in case another hurricane comes. Hasn’t been used at any scale yet, but the idea may end up being useful to low-income, land-owning people whose houses have been destroyed, but who do not have insurance or government assistance to rebuild.

**Money wasted on FEMA Trailers instead of permanent housing repairs :** The FEMA agency is only allowed to supply temporary housing after a disaster, not permanent housing. So the FEMA budget could only be used to buy flimsy and costly trailers for people to live in while they rebuild their houses, or to pay big hotel bills for people to stay while their houses rotted. Huge waste of money that could have been injected into rebuilding the city. The \$65,000 it costs to buy these trailers (paid for by USA taxpayers!) might have been much more wisely invested in helping people repair and rebuild their houses – or even building “Katrina Cottages”, but FEMA regulations do not allow this.

## 1. Visit to Holy Cross Neighborhood (part of the worst-hit Lower 9th Ward) :

This is an old, comfortable, lower-income neighborhood in the "Lower Ninth Ward" of tree-lined streets and modest single family homes and double houses ("duplexes") with two units sharing a common wall (45% owner-occupied and 55% rented) which stretches along the levee which keeps the Mississippi River out of the neighborhood. Flooding was very bad here. We're guided around by a woman named **Pam Dashielle**, who is a neighborhood leader here. She tells us that Holy Cross was a tightly-knit community, in which lots of families are relatives and friends living in a very strong social fabric – the kind of neighborhood where everybody knows everybody else. There was a lot of looting in the neighborhood after the storm, when all the houses were empty, and most people lost just about everything either from the flooding destruction or the subsequent looting.



- **Infrastructure just recently restored :** The water supply and electricity were only recently turned back on, after nearly 9 months off, though the water pressure is still very low. and she tells us the infrastructure systems were in bad shape even before the storm, from years of neglect and no investment in upgrading or repair. Earlier, the municipal water was contaminated here and couldn't be drunk.
- **Maintaining the levees is decentralized:** Pam shows us the levee that runs along the river edge of Holy Cross. In some places, the levee is a tall concrete wall, but here it is a wide, earthen bank with a wide walkway along the top. She says levees are maintained locally, by districts (?) so a long stretch of levee might have many different district authorities maintaining different sections, with very unequal quality. No overall maintenance system, and this causes problems.



**A few families are starting to come back and start repairing their homes.** Residents were only recently allowed back into the Holy Cross neighborhood, but most are still living in far-flung corners of the USA – in Vicksburg, St. Louis, Houston. There were 6,000 people living in Holy Cross before the storm, now there are only 300. Plus, Pam tells us there are almost no kids have returned yet, and the city has no plans to re-open the local primary or secondary schools, so no place for them to study if they do return.

**Repair work to a few houses just getting started :** We pass a few houses where people are clearing out the rubble and gutting their houses – most doing the work themselves, but a few hiring small contractors. Here and there we see houses with signs in the window saying "WE ARE BACK AND REBUILDING." Many of the older houses, which were built up on blocks a meter or so off the ground, of cypress and cedar woods, have survived the flooding quite well – they only need to have their interior plaster walls gutted and replaced with fresh plastering or drywall, and many need to have their roofs replaced (roofing tiles blown off during the storm – lots of houses are still covered with bright blue tarps, provided by FEMA). The structures are

mostly in tact. There are also a lot of new "infill" houses in this neighborhood, mostly built on at-grade concrete slabs, of brick or wood frame.

**Most have no insurance :** Most home-owners and owners of rental houses in the neighborhood had no insurance. Pam says it costs up to \$100,000 to completely repair one of these flood and storm damaged houses – including gutting the interiors, replacing all the plaster walls, flooring, electrical wiring, plumbing, furniture, doors, windows, etc.



**"Shot-gun houses"** : In poorer New Orleans neighborhoods like Holy Cross, a common house design for two centuries has been the shot-gun house – a very narrow house which is only one-room wide, without any hallways, in which all 4, 5, 6 or 7 rooms are laid out, front to back, with the doors all in a line, so when they are all open, you can look in the front door and see right through the house, out the back door. The typical arrangement of rooms, from front to back, is in this order: parlor 1, parlor 2, bedroom 1, bedroom 2, kitchen (with toilet and washing area traditionally out back). The joke is that if you discover your wife having a tryst with her lover in such a house, you can shoot him right through the house as he tries to escape out the back. Some shot gun houses are single, free-standing houses, on their own long, narrow lot, and others are duplexes, with two adjacent shot-guns sharing a common wall and a single plot. Brad lives in a rented shot-gun house, and says there is initially a little awkwardness to living in these houses – when you have guests, they have to tramp right through your bedroom to get back to the kitchen or the bathroom, so there's not much privacy!

**Signs of gentrification already** : We stop to meet a white woman who has a crew of Hispanic workers restoring her flood-damaged house – a beautiful old wooden house with a wide front porch, polished wooden floors and all tastefully done up inside. She has spent so far \$200,000 getting the house repaired. She owns several other old houses in the neighborhood, which she used to fix up and rent out. She tells us that since the storm, she has also bought up very cheaply several other historic houses in the neighborhood from families who decided not to come back, "to save them" from being bought up and torn down by the developers. Now she has plans to restore these other houses to their former glory and rent them out. This woman is clearly fond of the neighborhood, embedded in its social fabric and visits and gossips warmly with all the passers-by. But it's clear that this is the wave of the future: these shabby, battered old wooden houses, which used to provide affordable rentals for the city's lower-income families, are being recognized as beautiful structures and will be increasingly snapped up, restored and rented out for much higher rates to newcomers with more money and a taste for historic neighborhoods.



**Quotes from Pam Dashielle :**

- "I'll tell you, you don't want everything being controlled by the government, because those folks don't know much."
- "We want to control our lives. We'll work with anybody – no exclusion. We can do it, we are doing it, and we want to be able to do it stronger, faster and better."
- "A lot of what's going on here in New Orleans is working to undermine our community. People are still all over the place. We're trying to keep in touch with them, but a lot of them are just dropping off the radar."
- "We're a poor neighborhood, but a strong one. I feel stronger after the storm."

**Organizations working to help after the hurricane :**

- **Mercy Corps** : This NGO has been running a special "Gulf Coast Hurricane Recovery Program" which works with poorer neighborhoods in New Orleans and the gulf coast area helping people to rebuild their community organizations, revitalize social structures, organizing seminars, setting up recovery centers, organizing community projects which get people back and working together, has a website and t-shirts. Active in Holy Cross. ([www.mercycorps.org](http://www.mercycorps.org))
- **NIVA** : recovery center (?)
- **Disaster Relief Centers** (run by the federal government's FEMA) – but these closed after four months. They just answered questions, provided no significant help.
- **Odyssey House** (?)
- **ACORN** (?)

## 2. Visit to another part of the Lower Ninth Ward, next to where the levee was broken :



**The Lower 9th Ward is the worst-hit area of the city :** In this area of the city, which is adjacent to the levee that broke, the destruction was by far the worst in the whole city. This area had the largest number of deaths – bodies are still being found in houses here, ten months after the storm. Nobody died from the hurricane itself, which only blew off a few roofs and then passed on, but from the floods that came after the storm. Many people who had no means to evacuate (elderly, handicapped, infirm and children) were trapped in their houses and drowned when the flood-waters rose. This is another old, traditionally poor black neighborhood that is built on some of the city's lowest land, and has been flooded many times in the past, during other storms. This time (as before), a big barge crashed into the levee wall running along the edge of the Lower Ninth Ward and broke it, so

the water came flooding into the area from the Industrial Canal on the other side with the force of a tsunami, throwing houses and cars and trees around, and flooding the whole neighborhood right up to the rooftops in a few moments.

- **Everything still a mess here, still in high crisis, looks as though the storm happened just last week :** We park the car near the Common Ground relief center, which is just a block from the levee that broke during the storm. Most of the houses here are totally destroyed, and there seems to have been remarkably little clearing away of debris after so many months. It looks like the storm could have happened last week. Large stretches of this neighborhood still abandoned, nobody around. No sewage or electricity supply yet. There is water supply, but it's toxic and cannot be drunk.
- **Keeping an axe in the attic :** We hear that in New Orleans, it's common procedure to keep an axe in your attic, since the city has been flooded so many times. The axe is to break a hole in your roof, if you get trapped in your house during a storm, so you can climb out onto the roof and wait for someone to come rescue you or at least swim away. In the Lower Ninth Ward, many people couldn't even break out of their roofs, because the waters came rushing so fast, and because so many were elderly or disabled.
- **A lot of immediate relief here is provided by local people, not agencies :** While FEMA was dithering and Red Cross was absent, churches, community groups, volunteers and local people set to work getting water to people, searching houses for survivors, helping people get out, etc. The Lower 9th is a good example of that – most of the relief and support activities we see here are community groups, volunteers and NGOs. The only presence of officialdom is a string of black-windowed vans bearing politicians and TV crews to go look at a spot along the concrete levee, where repairs seem to be going on...

**Common Ground :** This voluntary organization started in an ad-hoc way by a couple of guys who tried to cross the city to rescue a friend of theirs (*long story I didn't quite get...*). They are now working all over the city. Since December 1, 2006, they have been working in the Lower 9th Ward. Common Ground provides support and organizational help to people coming back to their low-income neighborhoods to start repairing their flood-damaged houses. Common Ground gathers a lot of college-student volunteers who have been coming on their spring breaks from school to help people gut their houses (remove all the interior plaster walls, which are full of dangerous mold), provides community kitchens, temporary housing for returning residents in gutted houses, tool lending libraries, distribution centers for emergency supplies, second-hand clothing, drinking water, medical assistance, organizes community meetings, etc. A lot of students from Tulane University in New Orleans have been helping out with Common Ground.



- **New community health clinic about to be set up here :** We meet a young woman named Alice who is a registered nurse, and has been working in her spare time with a few friends to open up a volunteer neighborhood clinic in a fixed-up house down the road from Common Ground. People who return to the neighborhood and want to start repairing their houses face huge health problems – sun-stroke, heat exhaustion, respiratory problems from breathing in the toxic

moulds that are inside all the houses, injuries from the heavy demolition work. Plus the water supply here is still toxic, and people can only drink bottled water. Even the soil is toxic, having been impregnated with flood water that was polluted with petrochemicals and all sorts of pollutants during the storm. Alice grew up in this neighborhood, and many of her family members still live here, but she lives in another part of town, which wasn't so badly destroyed.

- **Nobody's stopping people from coming back, but there's almost no support for those who do come back either** : Like the Lower 9th Ward, most flood-damaged neighborhoods in the city are still more-less abandoned, and while nobody is stopping them from coming back, all those home-owners and renters are still scattered in temporary housing in cities around the country. When we visited, ten months after the storm, Brad tells us nobody is stopping people from coming back into the city and going back to start repairing their damaged, moldy, water-logged houses, but there is almost no official support to help them do so : no place to stay, no electricity or drinking water supply in many neighborhoods even still, no federal, state or local funds (loans or grants or insurance) to help people repair their houses yet, no schools open for their kids to go back to school, piles of rubble everywhere which are not picked up.
- **August 29 Deadline for cleaning up house plots – a strategy to grab this land?** We see signs put up by the city announcing an August 29th deadline for people to clear the rubble off their property, or to gut and "mold remediation" their houses, by which time any properties not in compliance will be considered "*Blighted Properties*" and be seized by the city. (FEMA has a set of technical codes which define exactly how houses are to be gutted and "mold remediated" before houses can be certified as occupiable – this certification is something quite serious because it is tied to insurance, government assistance, etc.) Since people were not allowed back into the Lower 9th Ward until this past month, and since most of the neighborhood's residents are either dead or still staying in other cities (where they get no word about what's happening here), this deadline seems a little unfair, if not downright cruel. Some believe this is a strategy the government is using to grab all this land without having to buy it back from people, as part of the plans to make the Lower 9th into a kind of flood-control area. But Alice tells us nobody is taking this deadline very seriously.

**People's houses are their only wealth here** : This is now and always has been a poor neighborhood. For many home-owners here, their houses are their only real asset. Alice's elderly mother, who lived in the Lower Ninth Ward, earned only about \$2,000 a month, which is below the poverty line, but she owned her own house.

- **Are you insured for storm or flood?** The insurance for flood damage to people's houses is provided by the federal government to all home-owners, whether or not they have private insurance policies for their houses. But insurance for storm-damage is part of people's private homeowner's insurance policies (which does NOT include flood damage) which anyway most lower-income families in New Orleans don't have. So one of the tricks the insurance companies are using to keep from paying out when people file claims for storm damage is to say, "*No, your house wasn't damaged by the storm, but by the flooding.*" And the federal government has also caught on to this trick, and when people apply for flood assistance, they say, "*No, your home was damaged by the storm, not the floods.*" In these ways, people's lives and futures are being made into a game of ping-pong between the corporate insurance titans on the one side, and the powerful and distant federal government on the other – neither of which seems inclined to pay out.
- **Lots of suicides, depression and post-traumatic stress in the city after Katrina** : Alice tells us that her nephew was trapped along with thousands of others in the Super Dome, and experienced things during the whole nightmare that caused him to plunge into despair. When he got out, and he and his mother were evacuated to another city, his psychological condition deteriorated and he had to be hospitalized. Later, the mother had to make a difficult choice: she had to come back to New Orleans to go back to work, but if she brought back her son with her, there the only psychiatric hospitals were closed. if she stayed in Baton Rouge to look after her son, she would soon run out of money and perhaps lose her house. Tough choices people are having to make.





### 3. Visit to Mary Queen of Vietnam Church Community, New Orleans East



This is a small, extremely tightly-knit community of Vietnamese Catholics, who settled here together as war refugees in 1975, after the Vietnam war. Now it's a prosperous, suburban neighborhood of newish-looking houses laid out neatly on a grid of streets, with the church at the center. All but 300 houses in the neighborhood were flooded – but only up to about a half-meter. Even still, all the houses have to be completely gutted. In the whole of New Orleans East, where flooding wasn't so bad, only about half the former residents have returned. We spend an hour in the community hall, hearing from the community's priest and leader, Father Vien Nguyen, and some of the local people, who describe how this extraordinary community has responded to the disaster.

#### Father Vien stresses that **"We are a community, not just a neighborhood."**

- **6,300 members in this community (parish).** Most have now returned and are living in trailers or in their gutted houses, which they are gradually repairing.
- **Lot of Catholics in New Orleans :** In most of the southern USA, the Catholic church is not so strong as the various protestant churches. But here in New Orleans, the French influence left the catholic church very strong.
- **This community has a long history together :** The community's elders all migrated together from North to South Vietnam, during the war, to be close to each other. Then in 1975, they all migrated, along with their priest, to USA, and decided to settle together here, in New Orleans. All of them know each other's parents and grand-parents, and the elders have been together for more than 35 years. Most of them are Catholics. When they arrived in New Orleans, the whole parish settled in this neighborhood together, laid out their new neighborhood and built their houses together. The community is strongly organized around the church, and the ecclesiastical structure is very organized. The parish is divided into 7 zones, each with its own leaders.
- **Ecclesiastical structure used in the pre-storm evacuation :** this system of church zones and leaders allowed the evacuation of the community to be very quick and well organized. Out of the total 6,300 people in the parish, only one 73-year old lady was left in her house, and it was very quickly discovered that this missing person was missing, so they could go back for her.
- **Planning their return just 2 weeks after the storm :** Most everyone evacuated to Houston, Texas. Using the local Catholic radio station in Huston as a means of communicating with everyone who was scattered, they began planning their return to New Orleans. Held their final big meeting on the Lunar New Year Celebration (a big feast in Vietnam) just 2 weeks after the storm to plan their return. The city allowed them to return on October 5th. Borrowed another UN community center to act as a "staging area" for the return to their old neighborhood, to provide people a place to camp out, and to gather all the relief supplies they had with them in Houston. Right away, they began dividing responsibilities for cooking community meals, procuring supplies, setting up zonal centers, medical care, managing volunteers, clearing up the mess from the floods, managing electricity generators, advocacy (getting garbage picked up by the city, arranging for electricity to be reconnected, water supply restored, getting FEMA trailers, etc.).
- **The first "pioneers" return to anchor the rebuilding process :** On October 9th (two weeks after the storm), the first mass was held in the old neighborhood, with 275 people attending. The following week, more than 600 people attended the service. The masses were also a chance to give hot meals to people, have organizational meetings, provide doctors to give immunization shots, etc. By the third week, 2,000 people attended the service (more than half the original community were back).



## So the church service itself was used as an important point of communication.

- **At first, they held organizational and information meeting every night.** Now the parish-wide meetings are held once a week, usually after Church.
- **Setting up a group trailer site :** The Church owned a big piece of land across the road from the Church, and so they planned this area out to be a temporary trailer park for families to live in while they were gutting and repairing their flood-damaged houses. FEMA provided more than 200 trailers and mobile homes for this site, and more are still being added. Amazingly, they were also able to persuade FEMA to install and pay for permanent infrastructure (water supply, sewer lines and electricity poles – an \$8 million investment!) for 300 units (even though there are only 200 trailers) in this huge trailer city, which they carefully laid out in such a way as later on, the trailers can be removed and permanent housing for senior citizens can be built in their places – the infrastructure lines will all be in place and already paid for by FEMA!



Father Vien: **"Longer term and short term go hand in hand"**

- **Helping other Catholic Parishes in the area to do similar things :** But other Catholic parishes (non-Vietnamese) around New Orleans were not so strongly organized as this one, nor did these other parishes have this kind of "village atmosphere."
- **Getting school running again :** The parish also organized a public "charter" school to be reopened just after labor day, so the kids here could all return to their homes and go right back to school, with no interruption in their studies. In a city where all the schools are still closed, to this day, this is extraordinary.

**Father Vien :** "Before Katrina, our community was invisible. We were never consulted about anything having to do with our area's development. All decisions were made without consulting us. But now, we are involved in everything – we are even fighting plans to make a waste dump out here, which will leak toxic materials into the water table."



polluting the ground water and water supply, rivers, etc.

- **Here is the single organization in New Orleans that likes FEMA :** Father Vien says that FEMA may have had it's problems, but believes they're well-intended. He says they know we are organized, and so we have very good cooperation with them. Instead of waiting for them to help us, we go to them with very clear proposals, knowing exactly what services they are institutionally capable of offering. So far, the cooperation has been very good.
  - **"No landfill" signs along the road :** There is so much rubble and debris and cars and toxic waste from the hurricane clearing and rebuilding, and many people are just dumping it in HUGE piles around the fringes of the city. In this area of New Orleans East, there have been big problems with uncontrolled dumping, which has been
- **Not so easy working with the City Government, however :** The city made an early decision "not to repopulate" New Orleans East, wanted to reorganize the area as a commercial center. They had plans to use the laws of Eminent Domain and Blighted Housing Ordinances to seize control of the whole area. They also used the same August 29 deadline we saw in the Lower 9th Ward, to create a legal justification for grabbing these old neighborhoods. Father Vien: **"That's why we knew we shouldn't wait, but we had to go back right away."**

**"For us, Katrina is a minor inconvenience. In Vietnam, the Mekong floods every year, no big deal. After our trip from North to South Vietnam, and then setting out to sea as "boat people" risking death. Here, the first returnees were the elderly, the same people who had made this terrible trip 30 years ago and survived."**



**Story of the trash being dumped in the median strips along the community roads :** As people clear and gut their flood-damaged houses, there is a lot of rubble that comes out, big piles of it. The parish got the city to provide a truck to collect the rubble every day. 70 members of the youth group then monitor the dumping, report on people who violate the rules and dump into the median strip, issue fines, etc. (this in a city which is still filled with rubble dumped everywhere, which is not being picked up by anyone!)

- **The need for an anchor :** Father Vien says that a faith-based center is very useful in a disaster like this, providing a ready-made, trusted and powerful organizational center.

## "Our strength is that we don't live and individualistic lifestyle here."

### **We can't afford to hire, so we do all the work ourselves :**

Father Vien says, "We've all become very handy with our hands. How is the rebuilding being financed? Father Vien says they rely mostly on people's personal savings, which are quite good. There is a strong culture of thrift and savings in the community. If necessary, people borrow from family or friends. Father Vien says he "Didn't want my people to fall into the welfare mentality." But when they do the repair work themselves, it's much cheaper than elsewhere in the city:

### **Costs of repairing houses in this parish :**

- |   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. gutting the house :                  | (free, all community labor) |
| 2. New asphalt roofing tiles :          | \$4,000 – 6,000             |
| 3. De-molding :                         | (free, all community labor) |
| 4. New sheet-rock inside :              | \$1,400.                    |
| <b>5. TOTAL REPAIR COST PER HOUSE :</b> | <b>\$5,500 – 7,500</b>      |

*(compare that to the lady in Holy Cross paying \$200,000, or to the cost of FEMA trailers at \$50 - 60,000!!!)*



### **Next steps for the parish :**

1. Organize people to vote
2. Broaden the anti-land-fight to include the surrounding communities, including black communities. This is not our own issue, this is a New Orleans East issue – so far, 32 Homeowners associations in the area are with us. Many different kinds of organizations have to come together to fight this.
3. Bring New Orleans back – create green spaces, set community process in motion, etc.
4. Senior housing and new church, all designed in the "Vietnamese" style...

## 4. Visit to the Gentilly Neighborhood Association :



This is a pleasant, black neighborhood of lower-income and middle-income families (both renters and owners) in central New Orleans, which was very badly flooded, up to 5 or 6 meters. There is a very strong neighborhood association here, and we stop to meet a woman named **Viola Washington**, who is a leader in this association. Her house, which she and her family have already gutted and lovingly restored after the floods, has walls painted in deep reds and greens, and potpourris filling the front room with the fragrance of vanilla and orange. We sit around on deep leather couches drinking cool sodas while Viola tells us the horrific tale of her family's escape from the city during the flood crisis.

**A few details from Viola's story :** She and her family were rescued from their roof by a small boat, but she got separated from her son and husband in the process, and they didn't find each other until 8 days later.

- Ended up with hundreds of other survivors in the Super Dome, which Viola says was like a war zone in Iraq. But soon got out of that place, but it took days to get out of the city, helped by local people driving around in trucks picking up people, and camping out together in abandoned apartments.
- Many people – especially elderly people from nursing homes – were stranded on the highway overpasses, with both ends flooded, in the hot sun, where many died of exposure and lack of water. Nobody picked them up, though army and national guard helicopters whirred and buzzed over-head, filled with soldiers with machine guns.
- Finally, Viola got with a truck-load full of 19 tired, hungry, thirsty and ill people gathered along the way managed to get to the border of the city.

**Here they were stopped by a young white policeman at a kind of blockade, who stopped them and shouted "Go back! You niggers ain't bringing that shit from New Orleans over here to our town!"**

They all went down on their knees and asked him to let them through, but he wouldn't. So they just sat along the highway and waited. Later on, the shift changed and another policeman let them drive through.

- As they drove on, trying to find a hotel or a place to stay, everything was full, no place to go, no help, no directions. They found their way to one designated evacuation camp, surrounded by chain-link fencing like a prison. A young woman was inside, with a baby that appeared to be dead, and pressed against the fence begging for help to get out, to get water, to get something to feed her baby. "No way was I going inside that place!"
- While resting along the road in another town, some local people drove by and asked, "How many are you?" and then came back shortly with dinners for everybody and some blankets. This kind of random, civic kindness made a big contrast with the brutal official form of help!

### The situation in Gentilly after the storm :

- Viola says there are lots of hurricane relief funds coming down from the federal government, but none of them are being used to help people get back to their neighborhoods.
- Plus, FEMA is starting to stop paying people rent to stay in their scattered accommodation (hotels, cruise liners, apartments) around the country, and people are getting stranded – no home to come back to, no jobs, no affordable rental units back in New Orleans.
- **Costs of housing rents in the whole city have gone sky-high.** Before the storm, you could get a 1-bedroom house on rent for \$400 per month in a neighborhood like Gentilly. After the storm, the same house would rent for no less than \$1,000 per month.
- **CDBG : Community Development Block Grants** – this is federal money (which goes through the state) that is available to neighborhood organizations to rebuild damaged neighborhoods and develop affordable housing. According to the rule, 70% of this money for New Orleans is supposed to go for lower income neighborhoods and 30% for middle income areas. But this is simply not happening.



## 5. Visit to the St Bernard Housing Project's "Survivors Village"

They have a website! [www.survivorsvillage.com](http://www.survivorsvillage.com)

The St. Bernard Public Housing Project is a big, sprawling public housing complex of 2 and 3-story brown-brick buildings, with expanses of grassy lawn and big old trees in between. The solidly-built project was built in the center of New Orleans in the 1940s. Before the storm, the complex offered 1,400 units of subsidized housing (a mix of apartments and town-houses) to a large and vibrant community of mostly poor, working African-Americans, with a lot of single mothers, children and poor elderly folks living there. The project was flooded only up to the first floor, and the brown-brick buildings seems to be as strong as ever – almost no sign of any damage from the outside.



- **People not allowed to come back into the project after the storm :** St. Bernard is another of the city's public housing projects which have been closed and surrounded by a cyclone fence with KEEP OUT signs. Residents have not been allowed to return to their units, have not even been allowed to come back and retrieve their belongings from their former apartments. And there have been no moves to repair the water-damaged units or to allow residents to do so.
- **Plans to demolish the whole project :** The federal government (the office directly under George Bush) is using the storm as an excuse to demolish the St. Bernard project. They have announced plans to do a St. Thomas-style redevelopment here, in which the whole project would be demolished and replaced with a new, lower-density "mixed-income" development, in which a much smaller number of subsidized public housing units would be built.



**Visit to Survivors' Village :** When we visit the project towards evening time, we see a group of tents and a communal kitchen which have been set up on the traffic median strip just outside the front gates of the St. Bernard complex, where a growing group of St. Bernard tenants are staying. Their visible occupation of public space outside their locked, fenced project is part of an on-going protest against the planned demolition of their homes. They are saying that they want only to be allowed to go back in, clean up their own houses and move back into their houses, for they have no place else to live.

- **The closure of public rental housing across the city has had a very big effect on private rental housing,** which clearly is going to

continue to go up sharply, and go beyond the reach of most New Orleans poor working citizens to pay. *This is the lynchpin of the struggle for the right to return to this public housing.*

## 53% of New Orleans citizens are renters.



**Plans to break down the fence and re-occupy the project on July 4th, 2006:** This group of St. Bernard tenants had a plan to defy the government's no-trespassing signs, break down the fence and go in and reoccupy their apartments. But because their numbers were small, they've decided to camp out like this, across from the gates, and gather their forces, publicize their struggle and wait and see.

**Architecture redesign and cooperative plans to revive the project :** These are solid, brick and mortar buildings. The people want to refurbish the flood-damaged buildings without demolishing anything. Some architecture students from Tulane University are going to help them develop plans and drawings, with lots of improved features for single people, kids play-areas, cooperative management, division of the big project into smaller groups of buildings, each

managed by its own committees, courtyards to be landscaped with places for community vegetable gardens, etc. Endesha says, "It's like gumbo – you put everything in a pot and make a kind of stew that everyone can share."

- The main point is to maintain the existing housing stock, and for everyone who lived here before to be able to come back and get their housing back.

## From the "Survivors Village" brochure :



**Who are we?** Survivors Village members are New Orleans citizens who lost their homes due to the negligence of the Army Corps of Engineers, were displaced across the country due to the mismanagement of FEMA, and are back to rebuild their neighborhoods and homes themselves. Many are facing homelessness as FEMA cuts off assistance, abandoning survivors wherever they found emergency shelter after Katrina.

**Why are we here?** Survivors Village symbolizes the lack of affordable housing in New Orleans, where market rents have increased 100 to 200% since Katrina. The tent city also exposes the truth about the current administration in New Orleans and in Washington: those with power to respond have no intention of providing safe, decent and

sanitary housing to the citizens who need it – unless they are forced.

**Why reopen the current housing stock?** Although the Housing Administration of New Orleans claims otherwise, most public housing apartments are in good condition, with little or no storm damage. The current stock is of better quality than any that has been built as replacement housing in the last decade, the walls and floors are solidly constructed of concrete. They withstood the winds of Katrina, and the flood water marks can easily be scrubbed away.

**We can do most of the work ourselves :** We want the opportunity to help ourselves and our communities. As Nagin (New Orleans' mayor) said at his inauguration, "Get off your duffs, control your own destiny. We can do this!" The longer the buildings are allowed to sit in disrepair, the harder the job will be.

**What is the government's plan for reopening housing?** They have none! But there are several land developers and carpet-baggers whose plan is to get rich by displacing working class New Orleans citizens, as Pres. Khabacoff and Wal-Mart did when they destroyed the former St. Thomas development. Remember – when you make low-income neighborhoods into mixed-income housing, the people get fewer affordable apartments and the developers get rich!

**Food for thought :** Public housing residents are the working class of New Orleans. There is more opportunity for decent jobs now than ever before. The government has pumped billions of dollars into the Texas economy to house our citizens – while their economy booms, ours is falling apart. To bring out people back, to rebuild our city and our economy, we must have housing now.

- **Join us on July 4th! We will celebrate our independence by taking back our homes!**

## Some quotes from Mr. Endesha Juakali, the leader of Survivors Village :

- "You want mixed income? I work, and I say you're not bulldozing St. Bernard, no way!"
- "HUD says the first floor was flooded and the apartments are destroyed. But I say the whole city's first floor was flooded and nobody's talking about demolishing the whole city!"
- "They've had an agenda for St. Bernard a long time, but as long as people lived here, they couldn't do it. So they used the disaster as a way of cleansing the neighborhood when the neighborhood is weakest. Why? Five blocks away is upscale housing, five blocks the other way is Dillard housing, and seven minutes away is the lake-front. This is a great location for bigger houses and condos.



The only problem is you got all these poor black people sitting on it! It's a cowardly, evil plan that came about based on taking advantage of people when they are at their lowest. But they never expected any opposition."

- "New Orleans is a 21st Century plantation. The white folks don't want to see us unless we're cleaning up their rooms or cooking their food or playing music for them. They don't want us to come saying we're miserable!"
- "You know there's a big convention of librarians in town now, and so tomorrow we've got plans to go down and disrupt the French Quarter!"
- "This all gotta get pushed in a more better way."



**Lynette Bickham, resident of the St. Bernard public housing project (50 years old)**

"I miss the togetherness of the resident community at St. Bernard. We saw each other as family away from your original family. If there was something you needed, people would help each other out. If you needed someone to talk to there was always someone to talk to. I miss that. After the death of my son I had the St. Bernard community to comfort me. The people in the community provided a lot of moral support, pitched in money for flowers, and cooked food. We all watched the kids grow up since they were babies, and wanted to see the best for them. Before Katrina we had set up our own preschool and afterschool tutorial. I miss volunteering and helping the kids do homework afterschool."

*(From the St. Bernard Survivors Village website : [www.survivorsvillage.com](http://www.survivorsvillage.com))*

**A Truthout film production. July 4, 2006 – 11 months after Katrina  
(some transcripts from this short, 4-minute video clip, produced by the alternative news website called Truthout:  
[www.truthout.com](http://www.truthout.com))**

The plan was to storm the gates and occupy the project again. on July 4, 2006. Changed to a more peaceful approach now?

- **(woman resident)** Yes, the reason I'm for a more peaceful movement is because when we first started this movement, the proposal was to tear down the whole development... Now they're saying it was just a proposal and we're battling for them not to tear down the units.... We still don't know what their plans are, because at one time, they was talking about saving 122 units, and that's out. Then they said something about saving 300 units, and that's out. And as far as I'm concerned, we need all 1,400 units.
- **(Malcolm Suber, People's Housing Relief Fund)** These buildings are very sturdy, they're three stories high, and the water only submerged the first floor. And given that you've got a shortage of 70,00 homes in New Orleans, you'd think the government would be more than willing to open up the public housing which is available.
- **(Malcolm Suber)** People would rather break the so-called law and have a place to live than to live on the streets.
- **(Endesha Juakali, community leader)** The government primarily wants to take the opportunity to use this to get rid of us, to get rid of poor people, to redesign the way New Orleans looks. They did not expect anyone was going to fight them, they expected nobody was here. But I want to tell you is this: what they didn't expect is the spirit of the people is greater than all the mass technology.
- **(another woman resident)** I would rather do this on the negotiating table than on the battlefield, but only if they agree to no demolitions.

## 6. Visit to the Saint Thomas Public Housing Project :

**The city's public housing is an endangered species :** Several years ago, the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) took over control of the bankrupt local housing authority. Before the storm, New Orleans had about 8,000 units of public housing, all of them occupied and many in solidly-built structures from the 1940s and 1950s located in now-desirable locations around the city. Though the city is suffering from an acute shortage of affordable housing and workers, federal and city housing officials have repaired and opened up only about 1,000 of these units to returning families. Although most of these units could be easily repaired, plans are afoot to tear most of them down and replace them with "mixed income" housing. *"We don't need to recreate pockets of poverty,"* said City Council President Oliver M. Thomas Jr. *"They don't work. We want more mixed-income, working communities."* Richard Barker, a republican senator from Baton Rouge, went even farther, saying just after the hurricane, *"We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it. But God did."*

**"Demolition by neglect"** Most public housing projects in New Orleans was built in the 1940s, after the depression, when there were a lot of programs in the country to support jobs, education and housing after the bad economic times. A brief flowering of the *common good* in American governance and social planning. Now most of this aging housing stock is deteriorating. The federal government has not provided budget to upgrade or even to maintain this stock of housing in cities across the country. Along with physical deterioration of the buildings and infrastructure in these projects has come social deterioration within the communities living there, with increasing poverty, social isolation, school drop-outs, drug use, crime, etc. Federal investments in social programs, employment schemes, education, health, child-care and opportunities for the urban poor have also practically disappeared in recent decades, so this is also fuelling the downward spiral in these public housing communities. This physical and social deterioration has provided a convenient excuse for arguing that public housing doesn't work, is problematic, and for tearing the projects down – many of which, like St. Thomas, occupy prime urban land which has now become extremely valuable.



The Saint Thomas Project was a large federal government housing project in the middle of New Orleans, built in the 1940s just after the Depression, when the country's national urban social housing programs were just being launched. The land and project is owned by the local housing authority. The project originally had 1,500 units of subsidized low-income housing, in which people paid rents equivalent to 30% of their income. The 1 and 2-story housing units were built very strongly of brick, and over the decades, some very large trees had grown in the lanes between the buildings. For several decades, the project was a vibrant low-income community, with a very strong residents association and the presence of many social organizations having services. The neighborhood around the St. Thomas project was an old and fairly run-down

neighborhood with lots of cheap rental housing, and also a very vibrant neighborhood, mixed black and white people. This is now changing very rapidly, and the whole area is fast gentrifying.

- **Project deteriorates :** But in the 80s and 90s, the project deteriorated. No government money was put into maintenance or repairs, broken street lights were not fixed so there were dangerous dark areas, and social problems of drugs and crime grew. As the neighborhood around St. Thomas began to gentrify, and affluent families began buying up the lovely old houses in the area and fixing them up, St. Thomas became more and more isolated.

**Redevelopment of the project as the gentrified "River Garden" :** Shortly before Katrina, the national government's HUD used the social deterioration and crime as an excuse to seize control of the project (from the local housing authority, which owns the land), evict all 1,500 tenants and demolish the entire project. The project is now in the process of being redeveloped as a "model mixed income housing project" called "River Garden", with a variety of pastel-colored, fake-historical New Orleans style houses (town houses, duplexes and apartments, which rent for \$1,000 - \$1,250 per unit). In theory, the new





project was supposed to contain a built-in cross-subsidy arrangement, in which the higher rents from the 50% market-rate units would subsidize the 50% lower-rent units. The first phase of the redevelopment is now finished. Instead of 1,500 subsidized rental units, the new project is to have only 300 units, of which 122 are supposed to be subsidized (and only 60 have been built so far), for low-income families (who will pay about \$500 or \$600 per month, calculated at one-third of their income). High-end rentals in the new project go for about \$1,000 per month.



- The fight for “1 for 1”** – The big advocacy struggle that took place in St. Thomas (in which our friends at nearby Hope House were centrally involved) was for each unit of subsidized public housing that is demolished to be replaced by another subsidized housing unit in the new development, so there would be no net loss of affordable housing in the city as a result of the redevelopment. But the redevelopment was supposedly organized on a cross-subsidy basis, in which high-rent units would subsidize the low-rent units, making the project more financially independent of government subsidies. This provided a fancy-sounding economic excuse for de-densifying the new redevelopment and greatly reducing the number of subsidized housing units in the project. The fight was lost, and as things turned out, only a fraction of the subsidized affordable housing units were replaced in the new project.
- Community organization undermined** : The process of preparing the redevelopment was done in such a way as undermined the tenants association in St. Thomas. Some tenants were understandably fed up with the drugs and crime in the project and happy to have the place torn down, others realized that redevelopment meant that they would lose their housing and might not be able to find other places to live. So big disagreements and deep divisions within the community, which made it difficult to fight the redevelopment as a unified community.
- Old tenants had three options**: The 1,500 tenants in the project were given three options: they could apply for a subsidized unit in the new development, get “Section 8” vouchers which allow them to live in private sector rental housing (for which the government subsidizes the rent to private landlords above a rate equal to 30% of the tenants monthly income), or they could move into other public housing projects. The unspoken “fourth option” was for them to simply disappear off the subsidized government housing radar. But as people started to move out of St. Thomas, and more and more areas of the project became empty, conditions deteriorated, got more dangerous and troubled and violent.
- People just got lost** : The problem was that there were very few subsidized units available in the new redevelopment and long waiting lists for units in other public housing projects. At the same time, private sector rental housing available in the city (especially in the “better neighborhoods”) was mostly too expensive, or else landlords didn’t want poor people with Section 8 vouchers living in their rental units and bucked the rules and regulations of the voucher system. Plus, there is overall an extreme shortage of affordable rental housing in the city anyway. The number of available affordable housing units in the city had been steadily declining as the city gentrified, old rooming houses were bought up by yuppies and renovated into single-family homes and rents went up. The city’s tenant council had already been fractured, and low-income renters were in a pretty vulnerable position – nobody advocating for their housing needs. So when St. Thomas was torn down, most of its tenants simply disappeared.
- A poverty creation scheme** : The dispersal of St. Thomas tenants thus became a poverty creation scheme, in which people were forced to move to an even lower standard of housing in the low-lying areas of the city, or into living conditions that were much more crowded and more costly, many losing their jobs and support structures in the process.



**Social and income gap has widened in the new project** : In the new “River Garden” project, the market-rate rental units were supposed to reach lower-middle income families, so that the mix of “mixed income” families would actually be mixed. Nobody objected to that. But as it has happened, most of the market rate units have been grabbed by high-income families, because they are affordable and nice and located in a fast-gentrifying neighborhood which has now become desirable. So the social and income gap between the people living in the subsidized units, and the people living in the market-rate units is much wider than it was supposed to be. This makes it difficult to develop a sense of community in the place. Apparently some of the high-income folks resent having poor

neighbors, and they just park their cars and go inside and close the door – very little socializing in the lanes and on the front porches, as was common in St. Thomas.

- **Wal-Mart instead of "local businesses"** : The original project parameters called for space in the redevelopment for small local entrepreneurs from the project itself to have shops and restaurants catering to the neighborhood. But some aggressive lobbying by Wal-mart convinced remaining residents that having a giant, multinational discount store within the development would be more convenient!
- **Many people are very happy about the redevelopment of St. Thomas** : Many in the city saw dollar signs in this kind of redevelopment, and many saw it as a chance to *clean up* and *beautify* areas of the city that had social problems that go with poverty and exclusion. And we speak to one resident of the former housing project who was lucky enough to get a lovely subsidized unit in the newly redeveloped "River Garden" – she says *it's great living here, now it's safe and clean and beautiful, but she misses having neighbors to talk to.*
- **Expanding the St. Thomas redevelopment model to other public housing projects in New Orleans** : The national Housing and Urban Development Authority (HUD) and its local branch now have plans to tear down half of the city's 8,000 public housing units and redevelop them as "mixed income" housing, as they've done at St. Thomas. This has already happened in several other public housing projects (such as one called "Florida Desire"), and is now planned for several Katrina-damaged projects like the one at St. Bernard.



**Hope House** : This community support organization was set up 36 years ago in a wonderful, ramshackle old house just down the lane from the St. Thomas housing project. Brad has borrowed space to set up a small NPACH office here. Run by Don Everard and Sister Lillian, the place operates like a community center, providing informal education programs, help preparing kids to take the GED (High school equivalency test), community organizing, etc.

## 7. Fabulous dinner at Jacque-imo's, a fabulous New Orleans style restaurant in an old wooden house in the Garden District :



(Table for 8: Father Don Everard and Sister Lillian, Tom (who works with Brad) and his wife Stephanie (who teaches in an all-black boy's prep-school), Brad and his wife Tina (who works on food security with the WFP), Somsook and Tom). What we ate :

- Blackened Red Fish
- Crawfish Etoufee
- Prawns Jumbalaya
- corn-bread
- side dishes of spiced yams, collard greens, beans and rice, etc.

## 8. Next Day : Tsunami discussion, tsunami videos and pot-luck lunch at Hope House :

The next morning, Somsook presents tsunami experience at Hope House to a group of community members and young people working with various NGO and voluntary agencies around the city. Before her presentation, we screen a short video made by ACHR about the tsunami process.



### ACHR Video : "Tsunami Survivors' Dialogues : People-centred recovery"

The video shows very briefly the relief and rehabilitation process in three countries – Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia – and how the people themselves are trying to solve the problems after tsunami by going back, by building houses, etc. The way these groups of people are doing this may be different from place to place, but the video gives a clear message that :

- **people need to be central in handling both the short-term relief and the long-term rebuilding**
- **people need to do this rebuilding of their lives and settlements together**, with the strength of communities and the strength of their togetherness, not alone, as individuals
- **people need to go back to their ruined villages as soon as possible** and use the act of actually being there to strengthen their negotiations to secure their rights to be there, to remain on that land.
- **we can use a disaster like the tsunami to create new opportunities for rebuilding communities**, with greater strength than before the disaster.

After showing the tsunami video, Endesha Juakali, from St. Bernard Survivor's Village, said, **"We should have shown this video in the Super Dome on a big screen!"**



**Somsook:** (talking about the politics of the federal government's housing authority) "It's all politics and we can affect politics. We can create space, create a vibration, show the capability of people!"

**Somsook :** Instead of giving people these temporary trailers, which cost the government \$50,000, just give the \$50,000 directly to the people to fix their houses!

**Meet a local actor/playwright Monroe Bean :** One guy who came to hear the discussion at Hope House is a man named Monroe Bean, who grew up in the Lower 9th Ward, and has written and produced a play called "The Soldier" which tells the story of the three great floods that have hit the city of New Orleans in the last 100 years (1927, 1965 and 2005). He says that each time the city flooded, a rogue tanker broke down the wall of the same levee, at almost exactly the same point, in the Lower Ninth Ward, causing the neighborhood to flood first. He thinks it's no accident that this always happens, but that the Lower Ninth Ward has been used again and again as a kind of emergency drain – by letting that area flood, it saves the rest of the city.

## A few reflections from Somsook on the situation in New Orleans :

It seems like the people from New Orleans understood very well the message from our tsunami film and the tsunami experiences we described. Though they come from a very different kind of society, there was a lot of enthusiasm to share and to learn – lots of questions. And all these questions are what will fuel the plans for this next step – an exposure trip of New Orleans hurricane survivors to tsunami areas in Thailand and Aceh.



After visiting all these affected areas of New Orleans, I felt the key issues around Katrina are exactly the same as around the tsunami : That people on the ground have no power, and that the poorer you are, the more problems the system will dump on you – including trying to use the crisis to *dispose of you*. It's all just the same as in Asia.

The people in the Saint Bernard housing project, for instance, have been living there for years. Then one day, along came Hurricane Katrina and they had to evacuate their homes. After that, of course, people were in a difficult situation and they wanted to go back home and pick up the

threads of their lives. But the authorities fence off the area and say *keep out!* No discussion, no negotiation. So the poorer you are, the more problems.

Also, the role of the state is changing in so many countries now, towards supporting the making of profit more than supporting the making of human well-being or social equity. This is true in USA, in Thailand and many other countries. More and more, governments are moving to change areas where poor people live into more profitable kinds of housing – because whoever gets profit from this kind of redevelopment is in the stronger position now in our societies these days. When disasters like this happen, they provide a justification for the state to displace the poor, to change and upgrade and gentrify the neighborhoods where they were staying, and ultimately to generate profits, where before profit was not an issue.

**People close to state power who have money, look at the commercial development attitude as something of prime importance.** This kind of thinking has swept the globe these days, and is hard to avoid – governments around the world have gone commercial in a big way, and all notions of the common good or social equity are in decline. The decisions about how to redesign our cities – with or without disasters – are now firmly in the hands of commercial sector operators, and government authorities that are more commercially oriented. Even in terrible humanitarian crises like these. And that is the major problem.

It seems to me that the Americans, in general seem content with their situation and have no particular interest in building the communities, as a kind of stronger group to negotiate for more control over how their local development happens. We could see this so clearly in all the American people we spoke with in New Orleans – they're so articulate, so sophisticated in their understanding of the situation, and we got the feeling that there is quite a bit of interaction between people. But the real power of community - to do things together, to manage budgets together, to make decisions together, to take control over their own constituency – is not there. That power might once have been there, but it seems to have been taken away from people.

Which is so sad. It's sad because we hear so much about the United States having been born in a struggle for freedom, but this freedom has been taken away from communities, or it has been reduced to a single



*individual act of casting a vote once every couple of years. But communities are always composed of individuals. And communities can provide a very powerful platform for and guardian of individual freedom. This notion also seems to have been lost.*

***In other countries, this might not be so apparent, but in all the people we met in New Orleans, we saw a great deal of strength and quality – as individuals. But there is no power, no force when people are strong by themselves, in isolation, as individuals.*** Many times during the visit, I asked people if they could persuade the state to provide them with money to repair their streets and infrastructure, could all the people in the neighborhood come together and finish the work themselves, in a short time? And they all answered, *No problem! We are ready!* Which shows that the *potential* is there. But for me, the big question is why has all this power of community been taken away from people, and handed over to somebody unknown and far-away and probably corrupt? It's like a power behind a black curtain – someone from somewhere else, telling you how you should behave, where you should live, how your houses should be reconstructed.



These new houses we saw in the redeveloped St. Thomas project looked very nice. But those houses are not for the people who used to live there! They're for someone else, who is going to be chosen by someone else. You never know who is behind that curtain, pulling all these strings! It seems like the whole country is being managed by a system which is concealed behind a black curtain! Like a mafia system, and it's very far away from people. And as we saw in the terrible situation of people in New Orleans, it can be a very brutal, very inhuman system.

***If we look at the amount of finance for New Orleans' redevelopment, it should be no problem at all.*** Look at all the money FEMA spent to buy those trailers to temporarily house hurricane victims.

If they instead distributed that same money to all the families with damaged houses in each neighborhood (in a proper way, with internal checking systems in place and collective decision-making, accountability, etc.), how much communities could do! These roofs would be repaired, those houses would be reconstructed and those neighborhoods would full of life in no time at all! And if you did it this way, the whole reconstruction of the city would cost much, much less money, for much better benefit of the people. And you would be able to get the people to work together in the process. But that is not happening at all – it's all waste and delay and corruption and frustration and shattered trust in all the public systems which are supposed to manage and organize things properly. The management was wrong, and the system was wrong.

***I found that in New Orleans, the systems by which things happen are mostly vertical, very little is organized horizontally :*** people all link as individuals or individual households directly with the ward, with the city government, with the insurance companies, with the relief agencies and with the utilities – it's a straight line from the top right down to the individual person. But there is very little horizontal linking between people in communities, between different communities in the city, between different groups which share the same problem. We can't romanticize this idea of community: in Asia, people come together into communities *out of need* – they have no alternative, because as poor people, they cannot get what they need to survive as individuals, so they come together where they can only get those things *collectively*. Communities in Asia – especially informal communities - are a means of survival. All the friendly aspects of community - the warmth, the mutual support, the support and the friendships - all come later. The first and the primary motivation which brings people together into communities is *need*. So you see many kinds of horizontal structures within Asian cities, *because of need*.

***"If you're poor, you have to help each other, the vertical systems aren't going to work for you."***

But when we met the Vietnamese community at Mary Queen of Vietnam, they were together and had been together for a long time, having evacuated from Vietnam together, being Catholic together, being Vietnamese together in a new country. They have a lot of very deep links with each other and organization which is closer to something you'd find in Vietnam than in America. And that creates a kind of horizontal platform for them to work together and to respond to the disaster in a collective way. We could see very clearly how much security this working together has provided each and every member of that community - nobody was left out of the evacuation, or the relief or the rehabilitation process. And this is the only community we visited that is doing everything themselves, and doing it faster and more efficiently than anyone else in the city.

And they've been given the same assistance from above as everyone else in New Orleans, but this is the only group which has managed to make good use of those systems from above – like FEMA. Why? Because they had the horizontal strength, and the capacities as a *group*. That is a kind of "social capital" – if you have that, you can mobilize anything. But if you are an individual, you only can wait for the vertical system to reach you. And in the case of a disaster like Katrina, that vertical system has too many things to do, and you'll be in for a long wait!

***It might be that the Hurricane Katrina brings attention to the drawbacks in American society*** – it's not just the slowness or the inefficiency of the official response to the crisis. The same thing must be happening in other parts of the country in different ways, because the key issue is the system as a whole – how it allows the people, the local groups, the human spirit of creativity and self-determination to come out and manage the public development process. Otherwise, it's no more than the freedom to spend your money in a consumer society, but no freedom about anything else in your life.

Whenever I've been presenting what I saw in New Orleans back here in Thailand, I tell about the cost of rebuilding a house, which is \$100,000. People are shocked! It's too much. We understand very well that the USA has a different standard of living, and the exchange rates are such and such. But even so, it's *too much!* Here in the tsunami-hit areas of Thailand, new houses cost only US\$3,000! As we saw in the Vietnamese community, when they do the gutting and repairing of their houses together, they can do it very cheaply.