

TWO YEARS LATER, STILL FAR TO GO

By Adele Lyons

BILOXI, Miss. – It's August 2007, and across America eyes and ears focus on today's news: Iraq, elections, housing decline and this season's hurricanes. For most people, Hurricane Katrina, two years ago this month, is old news.

Katrina happened long ago, in New Orleans, right? Broken levees, big floods. We've seen this year's photos of Mardi Gras revelers and reopened casinos, so things must be OK.

Things are not OK.

Here, in my hometown, the Katrina story is far from over. For folks beyond the Gulf Coast, it's easy to forget that coastal Mississippi was leveled by the hurricane's winds and waters. More than 70,000 homes were destroyed or severely damaged. Families saw their neighborhoods, jobs, schools and churches utterly demolished.

Katrina and its 30-foot storm surge claimed the lives of 230 Mississippians. Two major bridges fell like dominos, and all 20 of our municipal wastewater treatment facilities didn't work for extended periods. Roads and communication lines were out of commission.

In the past two years, we've made great strides toward recovery. The first 15,000 families have received grants to rebuild and repair their homes. The Small Business Administration has awarded some 31,000 low-interest homeowner loans. The casino industry has enjoyed a strong comeback, providing jobs and promoting tourism. Unemployment rates have dropped from 18 percent in the months after the storm to less than 6.5 percent today.

In May we celebrated the reopening of the Bay St. Louis Bridge, not just a physical connection to our neighbors in Pass Christian, but a psychological and emotional reconnection. The bridge represents a hefty \$267 million federal investment.

Just recently, the Biloxi Housing Authority completed renovation of its Cadet Point senior facility. More than 45 seniors now call this place home, and more are moving in each day. The authority's Hope VI facility has 16 units occupied, and renovations of the hundred-plus other residences continue. Each month, nearly 1,000 FEMA trailers are vacated as families find more permanent housing.

Our recovery would be impossible without extraordinary help from generous people, organizations, churches and businesses from across the country. National nonprofit agencies, foundations and more than half a million volunteers have come to our aid. We will never forget their generosity and assistance.

Organizations that had little or no presence here before the disaster are still here two years later. KaBOOM! has built 50 playgrounds and has plans for 50 more. Hands On Network, Habitat for Humanity and many others continue working tirelessly.

Foundations across the country have been generous and intelligent in their assistance. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is funding libraries and housing, while Oxfam focuses on grassroots coalition building. My organization, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, has invested heavily in community planning, civic leadership and the arts, with significant investments still to come.

Most of all, the recovery of our region has been fueled by the energy and dedication of coastal Mississippi residents, who have worked through unimaginable hardship to pull this community and their lives back together.

But after two years, the stresses of the recovery are plain to see. All around, we find divorce, violence, homicide, suicide. Mental health experts tell us that even in extreme conditions, most people can hold on for a while, but eventually, our resilience just gives out.

All of us knew from the beginning that recovery would be a long-term task. But I'm not sure anyone knew how long, and how hard.

This second anniversary of Katrina is a chance to look back, reflect, and assess where we are and where we're going. From the perspective of someone who grew up in this community, here's what I see: For all the progress we have made, and all the truly outstanding support our community has received, its needs are still critical. It will take many more years and the continued commitment of all the players – public and private; local and national; business, nonprofit and philanthropic.

Looking ahead, we still see acute needs:

- Affordable housing.
- Rebuilding the nonprofit sector.
- Strengthening regional leadership. Katrina damaged the entire coast, not just one city. To rebuild effectively, we must look at the big picture.

For two years, the coastal area has made a noble effort. We're still hurting, but we're certainly not giving up. We will continue to depend on assistance, public and private, from outside our region. The Gulf Coast looks to national funders – not only foundations that support disaster recovery and the coastal area, but those that address the crises we face: poverty, housing, health care, environment and social justice. All these needs have been magnified tenfold by Katrina.

Two years from now, we know things will look better. We're optimistic that the challenge will grow less daunting as we progress. The Gulf Coast community is deeply grateful for the help of a generous America. We pray that help will continue.

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