

## Lower Mississippi River Dispatch No. 304

*Monday, August 31, 2015*



**Will She Float?**

**The Paper Boat?**



## **The Birth of the Paper Boat**

*In the beginning was the word. Before that was chaos and confusion as Katrina battered the shores of the Lower Mississippi River Basin. "Wow. Louisiana. Oh my God, where am I going to return to?"*

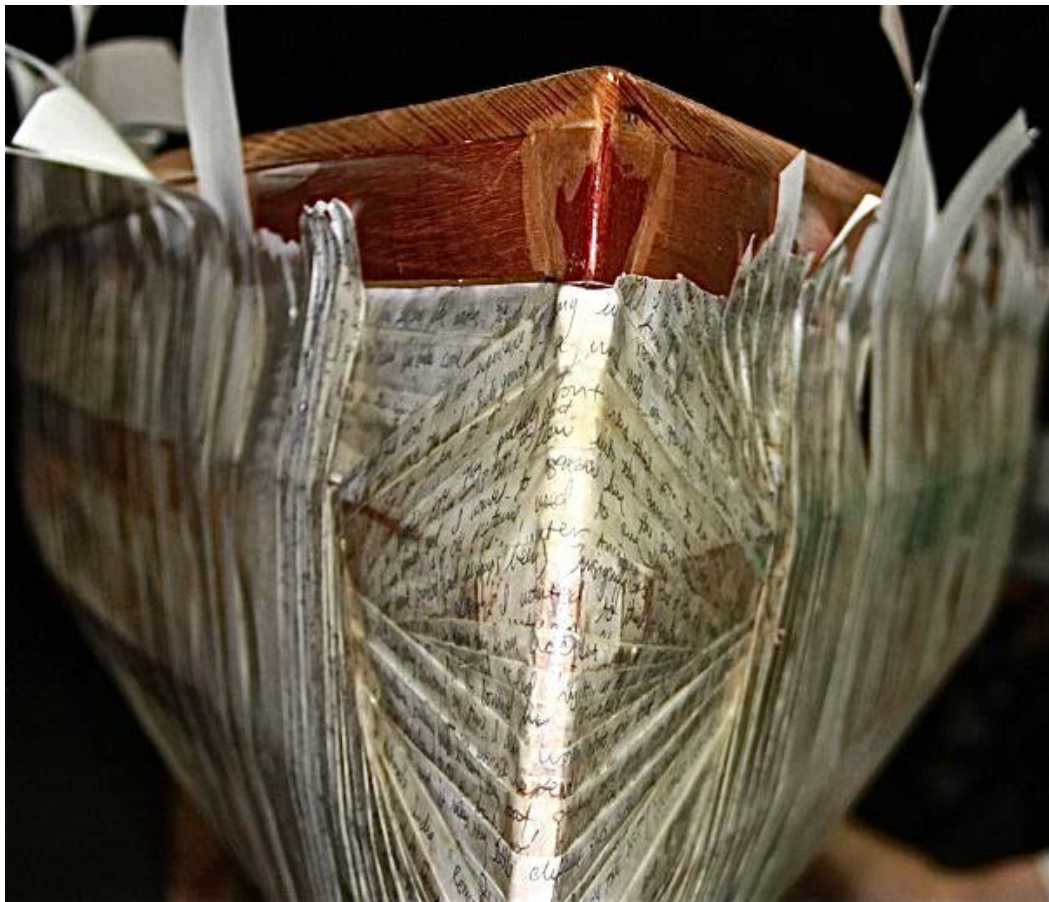
*Out of the emptiness came a voice, and it was the voice of the creator. The creator rebuilt the world one step at a time through a series of divisions and assemblies, handling each step with loving attention as the word became material became meaning. Each division multiplied upon itself as the pieces and patterns fell into place, and a new world was created in the place of the old one that was destroyed.*

*And so the Paper Boat was born, and now a vessel has materialized where the words of the many have all come together and through their mutual bonds have created a fragile shell upon which a new world can be buoyed and made to float, and directed towards new shores -- where all peoples and all creatures can find safe harbor, peace and harmony.*



*Words and Stories become the hull of the Paper Boat*

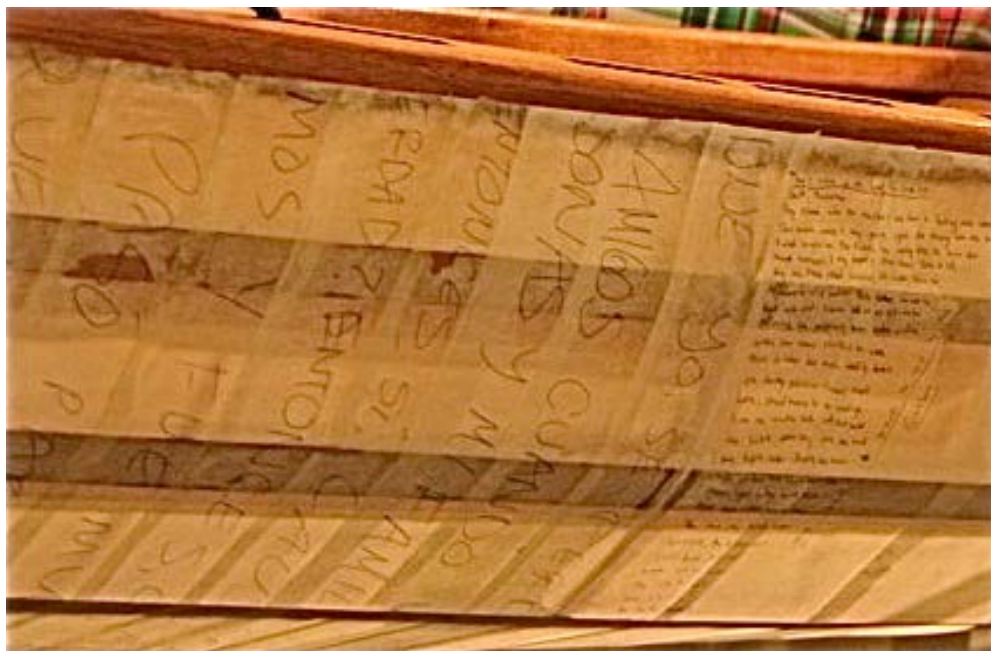
## Call for Stories



The boat is papered with stories from across the city about the impact, changes, and emotions wrought by Katrina. Add your own story to the next layers. Stories can be on paper brought to the gallery, emailed anytime

(staudinc@gmail.com), written down at the gallery, or recorded by artist Chris Staudinger to be transcribed and added later.

*(At Byrdie's Gallery until Sept 10, 2015, 2242 St. Claude Avenue, New Orleans)*



Chris Staudinger: In the last couple of years, I've noticed that when I've listened to Katrina news stories or watched Katrina related documentaries, something happens over and over again. It happened not long ago when I was driving on the interstate listening to the morning news. The woman's voice says, "Now we're going to go to New Orleans...Katrina... ten years later...to check in on the ones who never moved back." And my ears perk up, and I go from a passive listener to feeling like I've been strapped to a catapult. In her calm voice, she says, "Terrence Veal left New Orleans with his wife, six kids and all the belongings they could squeeze in their car." And this pressure starts to build inside of my face and throat, and I feel my eyes start to water, and by the time Terrence and his babies finally leave this tiny apartment he shared with twenty other people, they've cued the violin music, and I'm in tears trying to remind myself what lane I'm supposed to be in. I wondered how many people around me on the interstate were listening to the same story on the same radio station. Were they all driving around feeling like this? What were they thinking?

Luckily a friend recently told me that she had this same reaction to the outside world's calm, detached voices telling stories about a time when nothing could really be understood. There's a bursting feeling. "I can't touch it. I don't know what to do with it," she told me. It felt good to know that the feeling was shared.

To mark ten years since Hurricane Katrina, my dad and I have built a boat. It's a 16-foot canoe made of cedar and reclaimed cypress. The hull is going to be made out of paper, formed by bonded layers of people's written stories from during and after the storm. With enough layers of paper, the boat will be fully functional and seaworthy.



With the anniversary's overload of media and images of the storm, I think that now is an important time to carefully revisit our own stories from that time – what happened – where we went – how we've changed – what we wish we would've done different – why – how glad we are to be back in this place – how glad we are to be alive – and how anguished we still are from the loss.

In a lot of ways, I've spent ten years trying to understand the flooding – much of it through writing. But despite my own reflections, some of my most intense experiences learning about Katrina have come from other people's stories.

When I came back to New Orleans after Katrina, my friend Santi told me about carrying sick patients on sheets and mattresses up and down the dark stairwells of the VA Hospital, over and over, until he got taken out of the flooding on a military truck. At that time in our lives a decade ago, we were sixteen and all we wanted was to drive around and find gas stations that would sell us beer. We either weren't worried about the devastation or weren't interested in talking about it.

It wasn't until last year that another friend from high school told me his own story of Katrina, when he was separated from his mother and roamed the evacuated streets of New Orleans by himself, trying to find a way out (as a fifteen

years old). I couldn't believe that we'd been friends for thirteen years, but only then, in the Friendly Bar, was I learning about this backbone experience that altered him, somehow, over the last ten years into the person sitting in front of me.

As I've asked people about Katrina for this boat project, it's the same thing over and over. I get the feeling that I thought I knew this person, but then, there they are in front of me, suddenly carrying something I never knew they had. I'm amazed at what they say, the details in the moments of someone's life in an emergency, an emergency we all happened to have at the exact same moment in our lives.

Over one million people lived through that storm. Even more felt its effects, and everyone is dragging around their own emotional debris from the storm. Beneath layers of material rebuilding and a decade of time, this stuff is still here.



*Paper Boat At Byrdie's Gallery until Sept 10, 2015 (2242 St. Claude Avenue, New Orleans)*

## **What do we do with it?**

The late artist David Wojnarowicz said, "Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference." I'm hoping that this boat can act as that magnet. I know that if boats were a salvation from the storm ten years ago, they can faithfully hold our experiences 10 years later, because Hurricane Katrina and its debris are still a valuable frame of reference for people in New Orleans and others dispersed across the country. Through Katrina, we came to know each other a tiny bit better. You could feel that unity in New Orleans after the storm, despite all of the ugliness that the storm revealed about the city and despite the depression. Most of us wanted to come home because we love it, this island, even with the water, the danger, the dysfunction, the problems. There was a shared realization that we live in this place together as a community — or maybe a shared joy in the realization that we're here, period.

The boat will be installed in Byrdie's Gallery, 2242 St. Claude Avenue, with an opening on August 29 at 7:00 pm. All are invited and encouraged to bring their stories to add to the boat. The more stories, the more layers of paper,

the stronger the boat will be. You can hand write them at the gallery, record an audio interview during the opening that will be transcribed, or email them anytime to [staudinc@gmail.com](mailto:staudinc@gmail.com) . On September 10, the boat will leave Byrdie's and travel through the region, collecting layers to strengthen the hull.

I know that a lot of people don't want to reopen the wounds of Katrina. It's a time of loss that is hellish to revisit and almost impossible to describe. I don't ask for participation lightly. I ask with a mutual respect as someone who is slowly coming to realize the depth of my community's suffering (and hope) after the storm.

The amazing thing about a boat is that it can carry an incredible amount of weight and still slide gracefully across the water.

*Christopher Staudinger*



Katrina

*by Mark River Peoples*

It was the end of October. The water had receded in most areas around the city of New Orleans. My brother, William Eugene Peoples and family were visiting St. Louis, fresh off their stay in Deritter, Louisiana. They rented a house to weather the storm until the waters exited their home in New Orleans. Barely a foot of water occupied their home on Gentilly Ave., but they still lost just as much as the individuals whom lost entire homes.

My brother married a Creole woman from New Orleans named Katina. He loves Louisiana, once telling me, "Brotha, I will be in New Orleans for the rest of my life." Having a young daughter named after our deceased mother, Jade Iveara Peoples, only worry was about her pink room and if it was like she left it. Katina's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Greene, lost everything.

The visit to St. Louis was the beginning of the long, tedious road to rebuilding their lives in New Orleans. My brother, a stern, disciplined, retired Army officer, who taught me work ethic on the football field and Katina, his wife, a doctor, displaced from her practice, were letting the family know they were all right, but just starting over.

They looked good, but I could see the stress in their bodies. Having taken everyone into the house they rented, you could see the heavy load being carried through their eyes. Katina had two brothers that had families that lived with her parents, plus various nieces and nephews all hunkering down, figuring out the next step. I knew my brother had a plan, but he needed help.

As I foraged through the kitchen, I could hear my brother talking to our father in the other room. He had proper insurance, but the cost of a lot of the work that needed done seemed higher than what insurance companies paid out. Crews of workers from Mexico roamed the neighborhoods offering services to desperate homeowners needing help. The problem was, it wasn't cheap. The workers were taking advantage of the tragedy of our nation, profiting whenever possible. I heard my brother say to our father, " They want \$6500 dollars just to tear out the floors!" Our father responds, " I got the perfect person to help you. Your brother Mark!"

I smiled knowing I could help my brother get through a very tough time of his life. The plan was for him and his family to return to the rental home in Derritter, Louisiana while we squatted at the home in New Orleans. He would go to work daily, while I attacked tearing out the floors and the lower walls of sheetrock damaged by the brackish water. On weekends, him and I would drive to Derritter to see the family.

I decided to take the train to New Orleans. As a lover of the train from my college days, I thought it would be great to see the Delta and Louisiana from that perspective. I wanted to see the aftermath of the storm. I wanted to feel the landscape as I headed into the devastation. The train ride was excellent. The sun started to rise as we approached the Delta. I instantly started seeing sharecropper shacks and miles of cotton looking like snow. Fisherman line the lakes and rivers. I got confused thinking I would see less, but noticed more life than expected. Herds of deer running through the bayous filled with cypress trees and palmettos. Pelicans, roseate spoonbills, egrets, and wood ducks took flight as the train rolled by. I didn't see any devastation to wildlife, but thriving ecosystems -reborn.



I arrived in New Orleans. My brother picked me up from the train station after a long day at work. Eyes weary and I noticed something out of the ordinary. There were half smoked cigars in his ashtray. No way, I thought to myself, my straight-laced brother smoking! He informed me it helps keep him awake during his long drive between homes. He explained to me that we will be staying in the house upstairs away from the mold infested downstairs area. He briefed me on the safety issues. The street lights were still off in many areas and illegal activities like looting, drug dealing, and robberies were rampant in the dark. Thieves even watch houses in which home owners hadn't returned.

"Tomorrow morning, I will show you everything you been reading about. It's important that you see this with your own eyes."

That night I stared out my niece's window watching shadows in the night. Dogs barked all night, with an occasional gunshot in the distant. Vehicles drove slowly through the night. Darkness ruled. The smell of death, decay, and brackish water filled the air. I opened all the windows so the mold wouldn't harm us in our sleep. I didn't sleep that night, I could fill the death in the air.

The morning took forever to come. So excited and fearful of what I would see. The day started with a ride through some of the most decimated areas. Drove of vehicles stored underneath highways. More cars lined parking lots with noticeable damage from the acidic brackish water. Personal debris from homes littered the city. The markings on the homes symbolized where bodies had been retrieved. Rumors floated through the community about bodies being missed and mismanaged. I was amazed at the damage standing brackish water could make.

We ended the day with the drive to Deritter to see family. I was excited knowing Mrs. Green would have a spread of Creole inspired food. The plan was to bulk up on great food and start the work Monday morning. We sat around in the biggest room of the home eating and telling stories, but not once bringing up Katrina. I got the feeling they were all talked out, ready to move on.

The work day arrived quickly. Myself and a sledgehammer working consistent throughout the day, occasionally stopping to load the wheel barrel, and haul debris to the street. Trucks of workers would drive by giving me dirty looks as if I was stealing their work, but this was my chore. Every swing I made was for family and humanity. Dust filled the house as I continued on strong all day. I was determined to leave here with my family in a better place. I knew I could help my family off to a great start and incubate the healing process. I tried to double my work daily, so my brother would see results when he arrived home. Every day the large pile in the driveway increased. I could see the load being lifted off his back. It got to a point when he would return from work, we would just crack open a beer, talk, and call it a day.

Mark River

**"Wow. Louisiana. Oh my God, where am I going to go?"**



*"You are Beautiful" Grafitti on building above Industrial Canal, New Orleans*

**With stories by:**

**Mark "River" Peoples**

**-- and --**

**"Wolfie" Chris Staudinger**



*The Natchez steaming upstream from the Moonwalk at the French Quarter*

**Memories from August 29, 2005**

**"Wow. Louisiana. Oh my God, Where am I going to Return To?"**

by "Wolfie" Chris Staudinger

As today has come and the radio has played and replayed songs about New Orleans, songs about flooding, Fats Domino's Walking to New Orleans, I've thought about why we do the commemorating. "What is it makes you want to dwell in disaster?" someone recently asked me, maybe not rhetorically since I've spent the entire summer building a boat that revisits the storm. I asked myself that question over and over and over. Why lick old wounds when there's a big horizon in the sky? I've come up with a lot of reasons to head for the horizon.

But, after everything in the last ten years and in the last three months of boat building, I want to remember the wounds for a couple of reasons.

There was a lot of beauty in all of the loss. For me, that was the family who hosted me in Dallas. God bless the Chevalliers. They were a family who had strong roots in Louisiana and took me into their house sight unseen! I lived there for four months, no questions asked. They were one of thirty or forty families from Jesuit College Prep in Dallas that took kids in after the storm. Millions of people did beautiful welcoming things like this, and a million more came to New Orleans to help rebuild, and we wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for other people's help. That is certain.

Then there was just the loss. Katrina made me realize what it could be like never to come back home, if only for a split second in time.

An interview that I did for the boat has replayed over and over in my mind, along with these songs on the radio. Her name is Myrna, and, like me, she didn't lose anyone, and she didn't lose very much materially after the storm: she had a home to come back to eventually. Recalling that time, she told me "Dije yo, se perdió Luisiana. Y yo pensé que se había perdido. Que había desaparecido, ¿verdad? , del mapa, como decimos nosotros. Y digo yo, y pues si me puse a llorar porque digo yo, wow Luisiana. Y decía yo, ay Dios mío. Ay Dios mío. Para dónde vuelvo yo? " / " I said, Louisiana is Lost. And I thought we'd lost it. That it had disappeared, right? From the map, like we say. And I said-- and, well, I started to cry because I said, 'Wow. Louisiana.' And I said, 'Oh my God, where am I going to go?'"

You don't need a hurricane to know this feeling of loss or potential loss - it's just the splinter of a future without something you love that can shock you and frighten you into thinking differently or changing. With Katrina, it just happened to a million people all at once.

I think as I move away from Katrina and an identity of disaster, these are the memories I want to take with me. They make the dancing sweeter.

## **Chris Staudinger: Paper Boat**

*Chris Staudinger and his father have built the skeleton of a 16-foot canoe. The boat is big enough, Staudinger hopes, to carry the memories of the post-Katrina community.*

*Beginning with a reception at Byrdie's Gallery, 2242 St. Claude Ave., on Saturday (Aug. 29) from 6 to 10 p.m., Staudinger will coat the hull of the boat with 2005 storm and flood stories he has gathered from contributors. He hopes that eight layers of paper, brushed with polyurethane, will make the vessel watertight. Though he's not sure when or where he'll take the canoe to water, he plans to make it "fully functional."*

*Staudinger calls the project "Paper Boat."*

*"Paper Boat" will be Staudinger's first conceptual artwork. In the past, he confined his artistic expression to the written word.*

*"I'm actually more of a writer or poet," he said. "I've never really considered myself a visual artist. I just want to do something different."*

*Staudinger said that he used to lead canoe trips in Mississippi and once helped build a 34-foot canoe to ply the Mississippi River. Memory of that was the spark of the "Paper Boat" project.*

*Staudinger will be on hand Saturday to accept written stories on any sort of paper, or to record stories that he will then transcribe. After that, he will periodically move the boat to other sites, gathering stories as he goes.*

*"It's gong to be an ongoing process," he said. "Saturday is just the beginning. I'll take it to schools, libraries, churches, whoever thinks it's a good idea."*

*For more about "Paper Boat" read the story in the Saturday Times Picayune NOLA.com by Doug MacCash:*

[http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2015/08/help\\_build\\_a\\_paper\\_boat\\_of\\_kat.html](http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2015/08/help_build_a_paper_boat_of_kat.html)



*Paddling past Jax Brewery, the St. Louis Cathedral and the French Market*



Algier's Ferry, wharves and docks along waterfront at the base of Canal Street

The Lower Mississippi River Dispatch

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