

# Lower Mississippi River Dispatch No. 302

August 29, 2015:

10-year commemoration of Hurricane Katrina



**With stories by:**

Mark "River" Peoples

-- and --

"Wolfie" Chris Staudinger



## Katrina

### Mark River Peoples

It was the end 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, discipline, 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 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



**August 29, 2015**

**10-year commemoration of Hurricane Katrina**

"Wolfie" Chris Staudinger

My dad and I are building a paper boat for the 10-year commemoration of Hurricane Katrina. It's going to be a 16-foot, fully-functioning vessel. It will have a paper hull, formed by bonded layers of people's written stories from the storm.

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 the storm have come from other people's stories.

When I came back to New Orleans after Katrina, I was sixteen. I can remember that my friend Santi told me about carrying sick patients on sheets and mattresses up the stairs to the roof of Tulane Hospital, over and over, until he got taken out of the flooding on a military truck. At that time, our chief concerns in life were how to buy beer and where we would drink it.

It wasn't until last year that my friend Phil 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 (also 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.

### **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 floated somewhere in the city on August 29 of this year for the 10th anniversary of the storm. I'll send emails about times and places. And please send me emails or call me about

stories. The more stories, the more layers of paper, the stronger the boat becomes. Please consider writing something - by hand or typed. Don't worry about grammar or making your story "good" or "dramatic." Every experience can carry its own chapter in the book of Katrina. I realize that most people have told this story a thousand times, but writing it out is different. I think that the written word has a special power to squeeze the puss out of a situation. It grants special access to difficult places. Sometimes it makes things better, and sometimes it makes things worse. But usually, things look more clear. There are more details and more questions. In the end, there's something to show. There's something for the writer to hold on to, and there's something for other people to hold on to, as well.

If you would rather talk it out, we can record your story and I'll transcribe it. If you want it to be anonymous, it can stay anonymous. People have asked, "What about the layers that won't be seen?" I'd like to accompany the boat with an online and printed volume of the stories as well.

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 and 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.

**Here are some prompts if you don't know where to start:**

? Who were you with? Where were you? What did you see?

? When did you first realize that things were not the same as other storms? ? Did the Hurricane force you to evacuate? Where did you go? How did you get there? Did you like it? Did you hate it? What did you miss about home?

? Did you meet someone who made a strong impact on you?

? When were you most scared during the storm?

? Did you lose anyone during the storm? Did any loved ones move away for good? ? Sometimes photos carry vivid memories. Do you

have any photos from during or after the storm that have stuck with you? Where were you? What does it show? What was happening? ? Did a boat help you to safety?

? Do you remember any dreams or nightmares you've had about the hurricane? ? Did the storm present you with any unexpected opportunities?

? Are there any songs that remind you of the hurricane or that time in your life? ? What was it like when you first got back after evacuating?

? Was there a time when you felt like you couldn't deal with it anymore? Felt like moving away?

? After the storm, were there decisions made that got you angry? Added insult to injury?

? Who was your best friend during that time?

? What was your neighborhood like in the days / months/ years after the storm?

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