

Lighting The Road To Freedom

New Orleans

Data

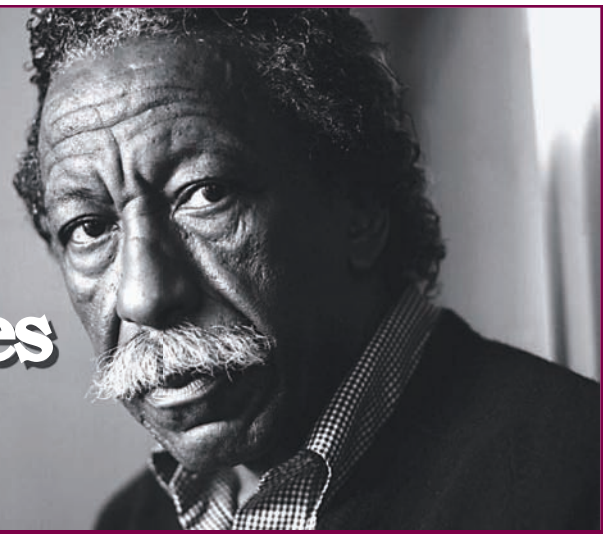
News Weekly

"The People's Paper"

Data Zone

**Black History
Through His Eyes**

Page 8



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One on One with Cedric Richmond



The Soul of New Orleans



Inside Data

**Rebuild
HOPE Now!
Host Mayor's
Forums**

Page 12

Newsmaker

**Mayor
Ray Nagin**

*Defines His
Vision for
New Orleans*



Page 4

COVER STORY

A Candid Conversation with Cedric Richmond

His face has been seen all over the news as the voice of the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus. His words belie his boyish face; for he is wise beyond his thirty some odd years. He is brash, bold, and outspoken, and rarely does he mince words. Some of his adversaries consider him controversial and confrontational, while his supporters champion him as that rare politician who is truly an advocate for their various causes. Data News Weekly had the unique opportunity to catch up with Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus Chairman Cedric Richmond for a candid, enlightening and informative discussion about the issues that concern many New Orleanians in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

EB: How did your property fare during the storm?

CR: In one house I had four feet of water and in the other I had seven feet.

EB: As you drive around the city what do you find yourself thinking about?

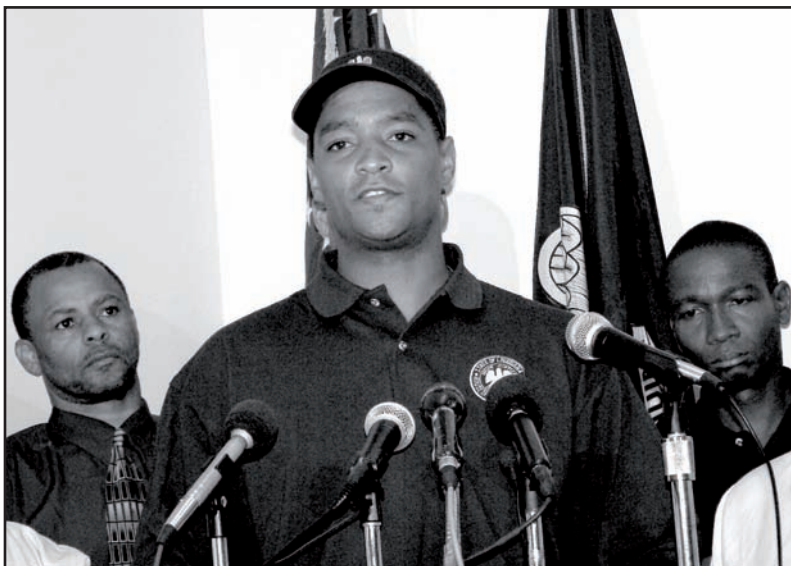
CR: When I'm driving around I must honestly say I think it's a shame that after six months there is still more than 200,000 flood damaged cars on the streets of New Orleans.

EB: You are the Chairman of the LLBC what is it exactly that you all do?

CR: We attend to the needs of the African-American population and we ensure that the concerns of our constituents are addressed in the state legislature.

EB: Recently you led a walkout of the state legislature, can you tell me a little bit about what happened?

CR: We had a Voting Rights Bill that allowed people to vote like we do in early voting in Orleans Parish. It's very simple what happens is that you show your ID at the registrars of voters, you sign the paper and you vote. But some in the legislature had problems with the bill, and the arguments they presented opposing it to put in plainly were weak. They were just red herring, and obviously didn't want to do it. So in order to emphasize the significance of voting rights legislation we decided we needed to do something to illustrate how important the issue was so we decided to walk out of the capitol.



Eventually we came back, and we finally passed the bill.

EB: You represent New Orleans East which was one of the parts of town which was heavily damaged. How do you see the future of N.O. East, and the city in general?

CR: New Orleans East has one of the largest tax bases in the city, I feel you can't have a city, at least a financially stable one without N.O. East it just can't happen. Besides what's going on with the east, I think it makes more sense for the city to figure out how to bring back every neighborhood, as opposed to deciding a blueprint for a smaller New Orleans.

EB: You have been in talks with leaders at the local, state and national levels about the rebuilding of the city of New Orleans, what types of things are you saying to them?

CR: I'm telling them that there is a struggle for power in the city and it's based on several things: race is one of them, but it's also class. Also let me say that personally I am very uncomfortable by some of the statements that I hear concerning poor people and their ability to return to New Orleans.

EB: A lot of people are having problems settling claims with insurance companies. The language in

many of these policies are vague to say the least. What is at the legislative level that you are doing to assist people in making the language in these policies less confusing?

CR: Recently, I introduced a bill that said that the insurance companies had to state every coverage that you had in simple English. For example, if you have five thousand dollars in coverage, we're going to pay you twenty-five hundred or you have five thousand dollars worth of additional living expenses. I thought that would help people before they sign off settling claims and that they would better understand what their entitled to. Unfortunately, this bill was killed in committee, but later I amended it to Ed Murry's bill, and what it does is that it requires insurance companies to make policy holders sign off on each item so they would know specifically what's covered

and what's not.

EB: There has been an ongoing controversy about whether or not to bulldoze homes in New Orleans. As we are now in the beginning stages of the process what are your feelings about this divisive issue?

CR: If we can't get to certain properties you really can't start to rebuild. The lower Ninth Ward can't start to rebuild until you remove some of the homes that obviously need to be destroyed. Even in sections of New Orleans East there are places that the average eye can look at and say this house cannot be salvaged. I think until we get these houses out of the way it will continue to slow down the rebuilding process. So I think it's a good sign to see those demolitions going on, but I believe the landowners should be involved in the process.

EB: There was a bill filed by Representative Tim Burns to consolidate the New Orleans Assessors office from seven to one. You in turn filed a bill that would have one single Assessor for the entire state. In your opinion how would that benefit the people of New Orleans?

CR: Well first you would save 6.5 million dollars in salaries alone if you had one statewide assessor. Also you would have a better chance for a uniformed assessment of property values under one person. And if you want to take the politics out of it, one assessor makes a lot

Continued next page.

INSIDE DATA

Cover Story
page 2
Newsmaker
page 4

State & Local News
page 5
National News
page 6
Data Zone
page 8

Opinion
page 10
Talk Back
page 12
Katrina Special Report
page 14 & 15

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Continued from previous page.

more sense than having sixty-six statewide. As to the question of how it would benefit New Orleans, I believe if the logic behind it is more efficient and uniform assessments of property value then having one assessor is the way to go.

EB: How do you feel about the recommendations of the Bring Back New Orleans Commission?

CR: Well I think they did the best they could with what they had. I just think they didn't have enough information. Also I think they didn't have the right mix of people to come up with what I think are meaningful recommendations. Now some of the things in education and some other areas are decent. However, I have some concerns about their recommendations concerning neighborhoods, I think they just underestimated or discounted the social and emotional factor that goes into the planning of communities.

EB: The race problem in the city has been getting quite a bit of coverage as of late, what are your feelings about the state of race relations in New Orleans pre and post Katrina?

CR: It's a large problem on both sides. I think if we don't find a way to unite the races, I believe

the federal government, the state and everybody else will be less inclined to assist and send money to New Orleans. Also I think we all need to understand that all our interest and futures are tied together whether we like it or not. In this city race has always played a role in dividing communities, and it's been a problem for a very long time. It's something that we don't like to talk about, but unless we address it, racism in the city will continue to be a problem.

EB: During the storm and in its aftermath, how would you grade the local, state and federal government's response?

CR: I think they did a poor job, but I would prefer not to focus on how they did during the immediate crisis of the storm. I would prefer to focus on what they've done from the crisis up until now. A lot hasn't been done and it frustrates me. I'm still frustrated that we still have so many abandoned cars and boats on the streets of New Orleans when you have the federal government picking up one-hundred percent of the cost. It's something that's been prolonged and eventually the federal government is going to pick up only ninety or seventy-five percent of the cost which will force us to use city money to make

up the difference. These are the kinds of things that are slowing down the recovery process in the city. Many residents are motivated and ready to come back and re-invest in their communities, but when you have something like the city where they can't even get cars off the street that's totally unacceptable.

EB: We just celebrated Mardi Gras, and there were some who thought we shouldn't have given the condition of the city. Some say it was hypocritical with so many people who are still displaced, what are your feelings?

CR: Mardi Gras wound up being a success; the media coverage was great because it didn't just focus on the parades. They focused on the lack of money that was coming into New Orleans. I think the coverage helped us get the additional 4.2 billion dollars for housing. However, my concern was that I didn't think we said enough beforehand about the fact that we still have constituents being put out of hotels and shelters with no place to go. To me personally it was an unnerving message that we had the luxury and the time to participate in Mardi Gras; more specifically that we had the ability to spend 2.7 million dollars

on police overtime when the city doesn't have any money. I think the businesses and the people that make money off Mardi Gras should at least pick up that 2.7 million dollars so that the city would not have to take it out of their budget.

EB: What are your thoughts about the importance of the upcoming elections?

CR: This is the most significant election in the history of the city of New Orleans. I think the election should have been postponed to a later date. I feel in order to have a meaningful election; people have to access to vote. Additionally, they need to have adequate information to make an informed decision at the polls. And to that extent we don't have the ability to contact them to talk about our platforms, so how does the voter make an informed choice.

EB: I know you made an attempt to get FEMA listing of residents of your district, which were denied. What were your reasons for trying to get access this information?

CR: I wanted the list to communicate with constituents. To see what they cared about. For example, if they wanted one assessor or seven. Also to ask if they wanted to create a plan that

would prevent people from having sit on top of their roof's next hurricane season. The purpose for obtaining the list was simply to connect us with our constituents.

EB: If you could tell the people of New Orleans that are scattered about the country one thing what would you tell them?

CR: That we are preparing a home for you to come back to. We are preparing a city for you to come home to, and we want you back.

EB: Is there anything else you would like to say to the readers of Data before we end this interview?

CR: I would like to say that Hurricane Katrina showed us the quintessential example of the difference between the haves and the have nots. It showed us the difference between the poor and the privileged, it was a shame to see people stranded on rooftops, sleeping on interstates, and stuck at the New Orleans Convention Center. Which by the way the path to was never obstructed, you could have easily got buses or other vehicles to. When you see this it just goes to show you how far we have to go into balancing or equalizing the class issue and address poverty in this country.



*"I want you to
come home!
As mayor, I will make
it easier for your
family to return
to New Orleans."*

- Virginia Boulet

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ACTION PLAN FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT...

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*For more info on these and Virginia's other action plans, visit: **www.VirginiaBouletForMayor.com***

NEWSMAKER

Mayor Nagin Takes His Campaign on the Road

Opportunity to define his vision for New Orleans' future



As election day approaches our beloved city, New Orleans is once again confronted with the unknown fate of what's to come. There are many challenges ahead in the upcoming elections for New Orleans but Mayor Ray Nagin believes that these obstacles can and will be overcome. According to demographic reports, New Orleans is re-populating at a steady rate. Between 198,000 – 220,000 residents have moved back to the city. Thousands of natives returned home for the Mardi Gras celebrations which gave many city officials hope for their future efforts to rebuild their communities. However, with the threat of the absence of absentee voters, many candidates are concerned that reaching their citizens will not be easy.

Voting in the city of New Orleans, according to Mayor Nagin, will be available to all registered voters who have returned as well as New Orleans residents who may drive in from other areas. Voting will take place at "super precincts"; several

individual precincts combined in various locations throughout the city. Bus travel may be available in some areas and the temporary voting polls may be constructed in major cities throughout the United States.

Another alternative for New Orleans residents is to write a letter requesting a ballot if you have not received your "blue card" by mail. Your voting ballot is an affidavit for your protection that is mailed back out. Your ballot is then sent to New Orleans to be counted. The problem with this system, is time and the possibility of damaged or lost ballots. With all of these theories and concerns, and with the eyes of the world watching, the voting situation in New Orleans will set a monumental precedent that will ultimately effect the way elections are handled from now on. The question on the minds of many voters is how do you have a democratic voting process when the system of democracy has been temporarily disconnected?

A more pressing issue for all

the candidates in this election and the upcoming November primaries for city officials and state representatives is the challenge to reach all the registered voters of New Orleans. Without a comprehensive list of displaced residents and their locations, many candidates will have the difficult task of "cold calling" throughout the country to reach their voters.

With all the challenges that lie ahead for this torn city, Mayor Nagin has a uncompromising belief that New Orleans will be redeemed. His vision is being heard throughout Capitol Hill and the White House. He explained with endearment his "new relationship" with President Bush. "I don't know how it happened" he says "but we talk and I can get the resources I need, I have been frank with him and he respects that." Mayor Nagin is confident that his vision for the city will be a joint effort at the top levels of government. "Everyone wants to know how they can help", he says, and according to the mayor, he usually has an answer right then. Mayor Nagin said that he is predicting an "economic boom" in the city of New Orleans within the next 5-10 years. His agenda is based on 1/3 of affordable housing to residents, 50 million dollars set aside for small businesses and new corporate companies bringing jobs and opportunity into the city. The current state of education in New Orleans is being decided as well. Mayor Nagin says that there will be 30-40 schools reopening next season. "New Orleans will still a place to come and have fun and experience our rich culture" he explained.

When asked about his concerns of how he is viewed in New Orleans he explains that "feelings are mixed". "Some people understood where I was coming from" as he reflects back on his earlier comments regarding the mishandling of Katrina relief efforts. "some thought I was out of control but it was a psychological release through me for the people." Mayor Nagin explains that he had to express the feelings of the people. They

black and white people alike. He says that his support comes from white and black voters who want to build a better New Orleans. Although he is optimistic about leading his city out of this crisis, he is faced with a reality that he is very mindful of. "Some people don't want to see billions of dollars controlled by me", he says with a serious tone.

Mayor Nagin seems to be taking it all in stride. He is steadfast in his vision for a "new" New Orleans. "I



were mad and someone needed to see their frustrations. He believes that he was the catalyst to do that. Mayor Nagin explains that Hurricane Katrina "exposed the under belly of poverty and woke up black folks to a certain extent." He explains that there is a "different mindset" in both

stand before you because to the people who have come before me; people like Dutch Morial, the first black mayor of New Orleans. I have to carry out this mission."

For information on voting for the April 22, 2006 elections go to www.ladatanews.com or www.NOLA.com.

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STATE & LOCAL NEWS

Rights Community Divided over 'Illegal' New Orleans Election

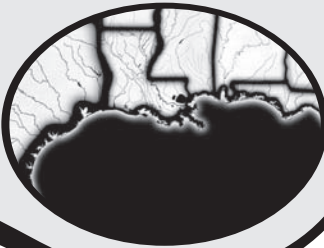
George E. Curry
NNPA Columnist

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – With elections in New Orleans a month away, the civil rights community is deeply divided over whether to mobilize displaced citizens to vote or boycott the controversial election because it flagrantly violates several key provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. On one side are Jesse Jackson and Political Scientist Ronald Walters. On the other side is an umbrella group spearheaded by the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation called ReBuild Hope NOW, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, activist Ron Daniels and many of the residents themselves. Walters said he had recently changed his position, first feeling that Black voters should be mobilized for the election and now thinking they should stay away from the polls. "This process makes us complicit – all of us – in administering an illegal election," Walters argued. "There is a conflict and the conflict ought to be resolved. I don't think we should go down this parallel [strategy of protesting the election while mobilizing voters] as mature adults." Walters, Jackson and Louisiana State Sen. Cleo Fields made an unscheduled appearance last week at a ReBuild Hope strategy meeting in Washington, D.C. Jackson said at that meeting that he could never urge anyone not to vote, but it was clear from his comments that he supports Walters' position of non-participation in the upcoming election. "We have to live with the outcome of an illegal election," an impassioned Jackson said. "If we support the illegal election then we, in fact, undermine the Voting Rights Act. That's the real problem with this thing." Veteran political organizer Ron Daniels urged Jackson to mount a legal challenge to the election, but regardless of that outcome, the Black vote should be mobilized. Vincent Sylvain, a displaced New Orleans community organizer,

said local citizens are eager to exercise their right to vote and do not want any further postponements of the April 22 election. "We continue to have our hopes deferred," he explained. Fields said if the election is to proceed, then all of the resources used to evacuate residents of New Orleans – including the military – should be mobilized to bring them back to vote. Jackson has organized an April 1 rally and protest in New Orleans to demand that the election be postponed. His rally is expected to focus on the right of residents to return, the right to a protected vote, the right of workers to organize and the right of displaced residents to have priority to job training and government contracts. Ironically, both sides agree that the election violates the Voting Rights Act. However, they differ on what to do about it. In fact, the ReBuild Hope NOW Campaign, of which the National Newspaper Publishers Association is a member, is not only urging displaced citizens to vote, but is holding four weekends of voter empowerment activities that include mayoral debates. The debates, to be moderated by this writer and Norman Robinson, an anchor for WDSU-TV in New Orleans, are scheduled for March 25 in Houston, March 31 in New Orleans, April 8 in Atlanta and April 15 in Baton Rouge. This Friday's mayoral forum will be at 3 PM at St. Johns United Methodist Church in downtown Houston, 2019 Crawford Street. A toll-free hotline (1-877-914-HOPE) and Web site (www.rebuildhopenow.net) have been established to assist Gulf Coast survivors. "The Unity '06/ReBuild Hope Now Campaign is the most comprehensive umbrella effort currently being undertaken by African-American led organizations to address black voter turnout and protection in the New Orleans 2006 municipal elections, in addition to focusing on other important issues such as relief, recovery, and rebuilding in the Gulf Coast region



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religion, national origin, age, disability, or economic status.
If you or someone you know has been discriminated against, you should call
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continued on page 6

STATE & LOCAL NEWS

The Fight for SUNO's Future

By: Benjamin Bates

The future of Southern University at New Orleans the only state university for African-Americans in the city lies in the balance. Recently, twenty of the thirty-seven undergraduate programs were cut from the curriculum during a restructuring of the institution. Some of which included eight of its Secondary Education programs, as well as Physics, Engineering, Political Science, History and several others.

This sudden action left many of its present students angry and frustrated questioning their academic futures; as SUNO has traditionally been one of the university many local African-Americans residents use as a means of educating themselves. Avis White is the Student Government Association President and is a vocal opponent of the restructuring and has been speaking out at forums around the state in a fight to reinstate the programs that have been cut from the university. "In this restructuring we lost very valuable and viable programs that are important to the functioning and purpose of this university." She continues, "We lost most of our secondary education programs, and our science programs as well."

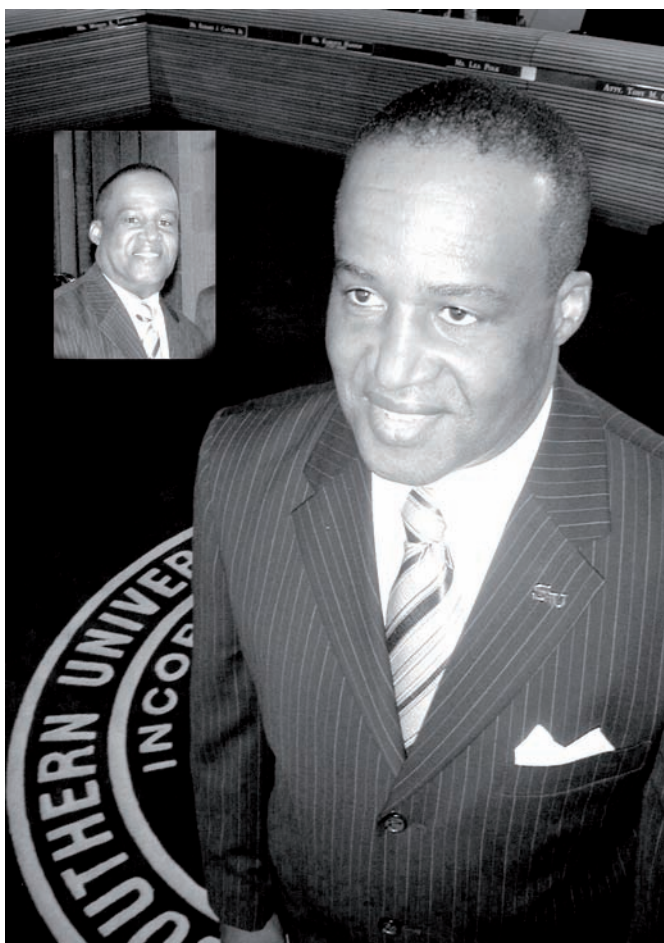
The elimination of these majors are a result of a December 8th 2005 meeting of the Southern University Board of Regents where Mr. Gerard Killebrew the Associate Commissioner for Academic Affairs requested program cuts due to low number of students completing the programs, or in the instance of secondary teacher education where he said were duplicated at the University of New Orleans.

Avis White and many others are ardent adversaries in this heated battle for the future of the university as possible litigation may be around the corner. She says, "We must do whatever we need to do legally to protect and preserve our university." Her passion and perseverance is evident as she states, "We don't want the character of SUNO to change, and we want our school to remain a four year degree granting institution, with

open admissions and return the programs that were cut." "In addition we want SUNO to be strengthened and not weakened."

But for now SUNO's future remains uncertain, as present students and the potential pool of student remains scattered all over the country. Also with the restructuring of its programs the history and legacy of this storied university may be in jeopardy.

In years past many New Orleans residents have used SUNO as a passageway to the middle class but that door may soon be closing, "This act by the board of regents may impede and impair our young people to have opportunities for obtaining a higher education in the days to come," says DeForest Cornish an educator and SUNO graduate who presently teaches in the New York City Public School System.



Recently selected Southern University new System President Dr. Ralph Slaughter said one of his first jobs is to work on rebuilding the New Orleans campus, get the students back, but deep curriculum cuts could threaten his plans

Which would be a shame says many of the proponents of bringing back the programs that have been lost. Some forecast that in the larger picture that New Orleans may suffer long term ramifications because since opening its doors in 1959 the school has been the bridge that many African-Americans in New Orleans have crossed that has catapulted them into the middle-class. Dr. George Amedee, a political science professor at SUNO says, "The elimination of these programs may have an adverse effect and discourage some potential students because it limits their choices of what to study."

As for now SUNO student populations has dwindled by nearly forty percent and is presently in a state of disrepair. But Dr. Amedee sees some signs of hope, "It's been said that if we get our enrollment up some of those programs that were eliminated may return." But since that is not the present reality Ms. White and her cohorts are continuing the fight to maintain SUNO as the beacon light leading the African-American population of New Orleans into the future, and she is keeping the fight leading the charge as she says, "We will continue to fight for our university and our right to a higher education."

Election

continued from page 5

relative to the catastrophes of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005," Vincent T. Sylvain, regional director of ReBuild Hope, explained in a letter to the moderators of the mayoral forums. "Besides providing a platform whereby residents may engage the mayoral candidates, Unity '06/ReBuild Hope NOW partners will, as part of each Voter Empowerment Weekend, educate and instruct New Orleans residents on the absentee and early voting process," Sylvain continued. "Additionally, participants will have the opportunity to gain insightful information on other pertinent topics such as redevelopment plans, environmental concerns, insurance, their health and education." State Sen. Cleo Fields had sent a letter to the Justice Department citing what he described as numerous violations of the Voting Rights Act. He noted that "300 of the city's 442 -primarily in black neighborhoods - voting precincts are unavailable for voting because of damage sustained in and after Hurricane Katrina. "As a result of the changes in precinct location and arguably deliberate lack of information the State has provided associated therewith, the State has caused voter confusion which will clearly lead to voter dilution," Fields wrote. Jackson and NAACP President Bruce Gordon had expressed optimism that the U.S. Department of Justice would intervene and not pre-clear the election, as required by the Voting Rights Act. However, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales announced last Thursday that the Justice Department has approved the election for mayor, City Council and other positions and it can now go forward on April 22. But the election should go forward without the participation of African-Americans, Ron Walters says. Writing in his NNPA syndicated column this week, he said: "Most important, should we be complicit in helping to sell the victims of Katrina down the

river again, by urging them to participate in an election that will violate the very spirit of democracy represented by their numbers? There can be no justice election under the present circumstances and those who would re-take the city of New Orleans have designed an election to ensure that outcome. By protesting this vote, at every step, we are on the right side of history, the Voting Rights Act and justice for the victims of Katrina." The low-key movement to get New Orleans residents to boycott the election places some leaders in an uncomfortable - and some say, indefensible - position. Having worked for decades to increase Black voter turnout and participation, it's strange for them to suddenly recommend that African-Americans not vote. The position taken by boycott advocates has been made more tenuous by a recent poll that shows that contrary to earlier predictions, Blacks are returning to New Orleans at higher rates than anticipated and are expected to make up the majority of voters casting ballots next month. Professor Jeff Sadow of Louisiana State University-Shreveport, has come up with a study that paints a different picture of political empowerment in post-Katrina New Orleans. "His new study suggests that African-Americans have and will return faster than previously estimated, strengthening the campaigns of Democrats in the short term, and eventually returning the Crescent City to Black majority status by the end of the year." The newspaper quotes Sadow: "Even if Blacks are not returning to the city in the proportion, 73 percent, that comprised evacuees, it appears a majority, about 57 percent, of the returnees are Black." Of course, any modestly effective boycott movement might dampen political clout and do what neither of the civil rights camps want - to further diminish Black political power in New Orleans.

NATIONAL NEWS

Florida Parents Request Second Autopsy in Boot Camp Death

By. Saeed Shabazz

Washington (NNPA) - The family of Martin Lee Anderson, a 14-year-old who died in early January after entering a Florida boot camp for juveniles, asked that his body be exhumed for a second autopsy, according to various news reports.

The family attorney told the Associated Press that Dr. Michael Baden, a New York City-based forensic pathologist who reviewed the medical evidence in the slaying of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, would be asked to perform the second autopsy. The AP said that Dr. Baden has not responded to calls for a comment.

A videotape shows young Anderson being beaten, kneed and dragged by guards at the Panama City facility only hours after his arrival, but the chief

medical examiner ruled that Martin died from natural causes not related to the beating.

"This child is the modern-day Emmett Till," argues Florida State Senator Frederica Wilson. "You have to see the photos of this child's face to understand what I am saying."

Sen. Wilson said that the Bay County boot camp was closed Feb. 21 after the Florida State Black Legislative Caucus and Florida State office of the NAACP demanded its closing.

"The Black Legislative Caucus has closed down 10 of the 17 boot camps in the state of Florida, and you have to know that the Bay County facility was the worse," Sen. Wilson said.

"There is a serious need for systemic changes, and we won't stop pressing the state to deal with

these issues," Florida NAACP state conference chairman Adora Obi Nweze stated, stressing that the madness has to stop.

"These facilities have taken advantage of our young Black men, using chokeholds to make them say, 'Yes, sir.' Our children have no voice," she insisted.

Martin was sent to the camp after an arrest in June for allegedly stealing his grandmother's jeep and later violating his probation by trespassing at a school, according to officials. On Feb. 16, the Bay County chief medical examiner ruled that his death was due to a genetic blood disorder caused by a sickle cell trait, which caused him to bleed to death.

The Florida Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) said they wanted to hear from the Sickle Cell Disease Association of

America on the autopsy findings. The family attorney called the medical examiner's report a "case of home cooking" or giving the sheriff's office what they wanted, according to the Miami Herald.

The Sickle Cell Disease Association of America has not been silent on this issue.

"Attributing the death of this young man to sickle cell trait, given the punishments he was put through, does a disservice to the public and those in the sickle cell disease community," said Dr. Willarda V. Edwards, president of the association. "It is our desire that everyone is well educated and that they know that this attempt to declare sickle cell trait as the cause of Mr. Anderson's death is not medically well-grounded. Justice has yet to be served in this case."

The U.S. Justice Department announced on Feb. 15 that it is investigating possible civil rights violations in the case. The NAACP in Florida told reporters they were requesting a statewide independent prosecutor, and asking the U.S. Attorney's office to probe possible civil rights violations in the case. On Feb. 21, Governor Jeb Bush appointed the special prosecutor.

Activists charge that Martin was the third Black youth to die in a boot camp supervised by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.

According to Nweze, the NAACP plans on holding a town hall meeting in Panama City to discuss the issue of boot camps. She said, "There is a real sense of urgency on our part to get to the bottom of this."

Gen. Russell Honore and John Hope Franklin Honored by Black Press

By. Hazel Trice Edney

NNPA Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - U. S. Army Lt. General Russell L. Honore, who gained national attention for his voice of compassion for Hurricane Katrina victims still trapped in the city days after the disaster, has encouraged Black publishers to continue being a "mirror" for America.

Receiving the 2005 Newsmaker of the Year Award during the National Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation's Black Press Week activities last week, Honore responded, "I thank you all for this opportunity to be here for this great award. But, there's much work left to be done."

"A lot of people need help. Many of them are in your towns. They are in your cities," said Honore, who served as commander of Joint Task Force-Katrina, a disaster and relief effort by the Department of Defense. "And in the business you're in, you hold that mirror up for America. You



help America see itself. Continue to help America see itself, but stay off the bus."

Honore, now commanding general of the U.S. First Army at Fort Gillem, Ga., shared the limelight with the Lifetime Achievement Award winner historian John Hope Franklin.

With a charismatic personality, the three-star general drew laughs and applause with the "bus" quip. He was referring to reporters who became so involved in the story

continued on page 13

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DATA ZONE

Gordon Parks A Legacy of Vision for Black America

By Cheryl Mainor

The beginning of the 21st Century for Black America has brought with it a seemingly endless stream of good-byes to our beloved and famed Civil Rights Icons. And as we still struggle to move past the loss of our mothers, Rosa Parks, C. Delores Tucker and Coretta Scott King, and some of our fathers, Lou Rawls, Ossie Davis, Brock Peters, we add to the list of these greats Gordon Parks. The man who made us so proud, and carried Black Power on his shoulders, and used his lens to capture the proud face of Black America, and then display it for all the world to see. His commentary was bold, stark and left no room for denial about the conditions of the poor and the underclass

the world over. He was a true pioneer.

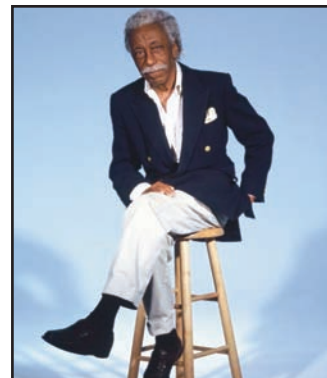
Gordon Parks' ground breaking journey from a poor high-school dropout to a black pioneer left a legacy of unblinking photographs, genre-forging movies, novels, poetry, music and even a ballet. He was in the truest sense of the word, the quintessential Renaissance man.

"I think most people can do a whole lot more, if they just try" said Parks in an interview he gave in 2001 when he was awarded by the Black Press of America for his lifetime achievement. "They just don't have the confidence that they can write a novel, or they can write poetry or they can just take pictures or paint or whatever, so they just don't do it, then they leave this

planet dissatisfied with themselves."

Parks to his many credits, was the first black American photojournalist for Life Magazine and the first leading Black filmmaker with major motion pictures "The Learning Tree" and his best known movie "Shaft" which starred Richard Roundtree. He even appeared in the remake starring Samuel L. Jackson, giving the remake his blessing. He was also an accomplished composer and author. Roundtree says of Parks, "Gordon was the ultimate cool. There is no one cooler than Gordon Parks."

Parks photography covered everything from fashion to sports during his 20 years at Life from 1948 to 1968, but it was his gritty photo essays on the grinding effects of poverty



Gordon Parks, Renaissance Man, was known by many as the first Black photojournalist for Life magazine, and by others as the creator of Shaft.

in the United States and abroad and on the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement.

Said Parks, "Those special problems spawned by poverty and crime touched me more, and I dug into them with more enthusiasm, they revealed the superiority of the lens of my camera to explore the dilemmas they posed."

Gordon Parks died on March 7, 2006 in New York at the age of 93.

American Gothic, this photo series chronicled the day to day life of a Black government cleaning woman, Ella Watson, and exposed the evils of racism, the evils of poverty, the discrimination and the bigotry, by showing the people who suffered most under it.

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DATA ZONE

The Old Settler

Review and Photos by: Glenn Summers

Anthony Bean Community Theater strikes gold once again with its latest production John Henry Redwood's award winning/drama (The Old Settler directed by Anthony Bean). The play is set in the 1940's in Harlem, New York where Elizabeth Borny (played by veteran actress Pat McGuire Hill) lives with her sister, Quilly McGrath (played by veteran actress Carol Sutton). The plot thickens when they take in a young and impressionable male roommate; Husband Witherspoon (played by newcomer Kenneth Brown Jr.) who moves in to help with the rent. Husband has traveled from South Carolina to Harlem and up to this point has engaged in a futile search for his girlfriend Lou Bessie Preston (played by newcomer Amber Wilkinson). His search comes to an abrupt end when Lou Bessie arrives at Elizabeth Borny's door stirring up a frenzy with her unwelcome presence as the young sultry, energetic vixen that will do anything to keep her man.

Husband is a naïve country bumpkin trying to adapt to life in the big city and who will do anything to keep his beloved Lou Bessie. But as he continues to live among the sisters he becomes embroiled in a heated romance with Elizabeth who has become smitten with him, much to the chagrin of Quilly who questions the morality of her sister for becoming involved with a man thirty years her junior. This play is a battle of youth versus maturity, forbidden love, betrayal and forgiveness. This is a unique, interesting and offbeat play that is comic as well as tragic; it is emotionally compelling and entertaining. It is a must see play, as the Anthony Bean is on a winning streak that sees no end in sight.

For more information on the play schedule go to www.anthonybeantheater.com.



MITCH LANDRIEU
M A Y O R

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MITCH LANDRIEU. MAYOR

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TRAIL BLAZERS

By: Eddie Francis

Although she has been a Data News Weekly Trailblazer before, ChiQuita Simms has found another trail to blaze thanks to Hurricane Katrina. As for so many other New Orleanians, Katrina is the one of the worst and perhaps one of the best things to happen to them. Her story is different, in that life started throwing serious challenges at her even before that fateful day of August 29, 2005. Being the resilient woman that she is, she has found a way to turn all of her challenges into great opportunities for herself and those around her.

Simms' life-changing journey started in July of last year. It was at that time that she was going about her usual business of being the energetic freewheeling, deal making founder and HNIC of DIVAdend Entertainment, Ltd. at the 2005 Essence Music Festival. Life intervened when her Uptown apartment caught fire and forced her to live from hotel rooms to friends' houses. Simms took it on the chin and kept moving.

Ironically it was Simms' perpetual motion that drew her attention away from the threat of Hurricane Katrina. Prior to Katrina's arrival on the Gulf Coast, Simms had been traveling from New York City to Las Vegas on business. It was when she stopped in New Orleans on August 27th, on her way to Vegas that she found out that the then-category five storm was tearing through the Gulf of Mexico towards Louisiana and Mississippi. "I was in New York the week before, and wasn't a big deal in there. So I had no idea that the storm was headed towards us. Then I got home on Saturday and found out we were probably going to take a direct hit," she recalls.

Simms' reaction to Katrina was no different than many folks' collective reaction. Like many other New Orleans natives, Simms seriously considered riding the storm out until her friends all decided to make a road trip out their evacuation. Also, like many other New Orleanians, the group figured that they would hang out somewhere else until the history-making hurricane passed over the area, then return to the Crescent City to get back to business. Obviously it was not



CHIQUITA SIMMS

that simple. In Simms' case it got a little more complicated.

Most evacuees headed west but Simms and her party headed east. They figured that they would find a place to stay in Mississippi but many places were packed with evacuees. They moved on to Alabama where they got a place to stay. Unfortunately that only lasted for one day since Alabama was preparing for the storm, also. Removed from their hotel rooms, the team moved on to Atlanta; and that is where they stayed. That is also where Simms' life took another dramatic turn.

Like so many others, Simms spent her days after the storm blew over the Gulf Coast frightened. She, like others, could not contact her family who decided to ride out the storm, as she was clueless about their safety. She also feared for the well being of her native New Orleans. "I was glued to the TV like CNN was a soap opera," she says. "People in Atlanta were desensitized to the whole situation because they didn't understand the extent of the damage." One can only imagine how unnerving the situation was for her as all she could think about was that her mother was one of the family members

who chose to stay behind.

There were other factors that made life in Atlanta very frustrating for Simms. Once she got as firm a grip as she could on herself, she realized that her funds were running low. That meant that she had to get out of her hotel room, find another room and eventually start looking for a place to live in Atlanta. Beyond that, was the mere frustration that she was in a community that simply did not seem to care what she and other New Orleanians were going through. She comments, "It makes you mad. This is your town. These are your friends and family. I went through a lot of emotions. Atlanta didn't respond well to us. They had this attitude that they weren't going to put up with all those wild New Orleans people. It wasn't the same welcome that Houston gave people from New Orleans."

Fast-forward to one of Mayor Nagin's town hall meetings in Atlanta a couple of months later. Simms was in attendance as a press person, ironically as a reporter for Data News Weekly. She sat with other media personnel from media giants such as CNN, the Associated Press, the Fox News Network and other national outlets, and even international media outlets. It

was at that meeting that Simms received the motivation to make a difference among hurricane evacuees in her new Atlanta community. She recalls that Mayor Nagin spoke about the city's plans to go forward with Mardi Gras. Simms felt that something was not right. "(The evacuees) felt that this wasn't right to do Mardi Gras when so many people still needed so much," she says.

What shocked her and other town hall meeting attendees was that they felt that they had gotten mixed messages about the City of New Orleans' commitment to the annual pre-Lent celebration. "We listened to Mayor Nagin and felt bad for him because we were under the impression that he had been forced to go through with Mardi Gras by the krewes. Come to find out, it was a City of New Orleans production! They even wanted to sell sponsorships! How are you going to have Mardi Gras but have people with no place to stay?" she wonders.

Simms decided that it was time for her to do something. She spoke to various New Orleanians in Atlanta and found that almost none of them, particularly African-Americans, cared about Mardi Gras 2006. They, like so many others, simply wanted to come back home in order to put their lives together. "I talked to a lot of people. I even talked to Judge Kern Reese, who's my mentor. And he told me, 'ChiQuita, you've got to follow your heart.'" That is precisely what she did.

Drawing from the energy that led to her company's success, Simms called on evacuees to make their voices heard about their disapproval of the City's aggressive pursuit of Mardi Gras versus their passive approach to helping citizens put their lives back together, primarily through temporary housing. The stage for their boycott of Mardi Gras would be the annual Saints/Falcons grudge match in the Georgia Dome. She used her public relations experience to publicize the boycott on local Atlanta channels. It worked very well as she received attention from local channels as well as national and international press. Along with the media support came moral and community support from those who finally understood the challenges evacuees had been facing.

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OPINION

A Beautiful Journey: The Life of Gordon Parks



Glen Summers
Data Columnist

A photographer's job is to visually inform, enlighten and inspire. It is important that one execute their God given talents in the attempt to make a difference in our already troubled and tainted society. Gordon Parks helped make minorities professionally relevant in a world where for such a long time they were excluded. As an artist I've found myself inspired by the life of this extraordinary man, he is the artistic muse for so many aspiring artist including myself. Parks is a renaissance man who fought against the odds and his life will continue to be an inspiration for creative people for generations to come.

In an era intensely devoured by racial discrimination, poverty and with ever occurring acts of violence inflicted upon African-American communities across the country, Gordon Parks defied and transformed the idea of how African-Americans were perceived in a Eurocentric society. His imagination took him beyond the thoughts of being a laborer, porter, janitor, pimp, street hustler, or other professions typical for African-American males during that period. But by navigating his creative destiny in a profession not typical of African-Americans, armed with a camera he became a prophet, chronicling his surroundings and serving as a messenger for the people. To call him a pioneer is an understatement considering all that Gordon Parks accomplished and overcame. He was a leader, a conductor and a trailblazer who provided the blueprint of how mankind should live, and execute and pursue life, liberty and happiness. He succeeded by following his true destiny; his passion for art, he lived a life filled with expression in his many creative endeavors. He is the James Bond of creativity. Gordon Parks' work is a journey within a journey.

Parks used the camera as a tool and a weapon to combat and convey social messages in an attempt to affect humanity. He used the power of the press to inform and chronicle; reinforcing a movement motivating the people and granting African-Americans hope and strength in their march towards freedom. His life journey was a quest in experimentation of diverse mediums: art, photography, cinema,

literature, and music. He had a phenomenal career of expression, transforming a society visually, and mobilizing a culture filled with bigotry and its complexities, and through his art he challenged the powers that influence and controlled the disenfranchised.

Ironically, in 1941 Gordon Parks was the first photographer to receive a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. His first professional assignment was in the heart of Washington D.C. where he worked as a photojournalist for the FSA (Farm Security Administration). documenting the effects of the depression afflicted by the very agency that employed him. On his first day of employment he staged a shot of a government employee, a charwoman, (a women hired to clean buildings) named Ella Watson. This powerful image displays an economically deprived African-American woman flanked with a mop and broom in front of the American flag, the photograph was a symbol conveying the hypocrisy of a so-called free nation and how minorities are perceived in a world dominated by a Eurocentric establishment. With the support of his then mentor Roy Stryker, who bravely published his photos in the Washington Post, they became visual evidence and an indictment of an apathetic government and showing that of the American Dream was out of reach for many.

He was most well known for his work as a photographer for Life Magazine. During his tenure at Life he gave the world compelling images of the Harlem Riots evoking the feelings and problems that plagued the community through the eye of his lens and aiding in providing understanding of the needs not only for African-American but Americans as a whole. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's Parks weapon of choice was his camera, which he used to chronicle and highlight the civil unrest that was taking place in America. These powerful images visually captured the brutality and the injustice and sins against humanity.

He was a man who led a full life which was full of wonder and splendor. His life was an example of how one can transcend the artificial yet real barrier of race. And while today we still grapple with racial unrest and misunderstanding we have his example, which gives us the faith that yes we can overcome any obstacles. Gordon Parks was a man whose life exemplified excellence in the face of adversity, and his life example has given me the will to aspire; he was a champion not only for African-Americans but for all mankind as he conquered and subdued the evils that plagued the world with his camera.

Glenn Summers is a New Orleans based photographer, writer, and visual artist. For comments he can be contacted at gsvixprs@yahoo.com.

Sham Election in New Orleans



Ron Walters
NNPA Columnist

I was recently given a document authored by Louisiana State Senator Cleo Fields (D-Baton Rouge), who was in Washington, D.C. visiting the Justice Department as part of a delegation led by Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. The document was so startling that it has caused me to conclude that the election planed for April 22 in New Orleans is – and will be – a sham.

To begin with, it points out that under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, changes to voting procedures in states covered by the Act, must be submitted to the Justice Department for approval or "pre-clearance." But the City of New Orleans has authorized changes in the election procedures, such as moving the date of the election, re-arranging the voting precincts, and etc., none of which had been approved by the Justice Department This means that had the election takes place without Justice Department action, the election will have been illegal. Late last week, the Justice Department approved the election.

Second, because of the massive devastation, some polling stations in the city had to be changed, some combined with others. But upon review, Senator Fields has found that some of these stations did not exist as functional sites. This means that voters cannot vote from these phantom sites, but that votes could be placed there by possibly surreptitious means.

Third, the list of eligible voters scattered throughout the national was given to the Louisiana Secretary of State, but withheld from candidates seeking public office entitled to the information so that they can communicate with potential voters.

The result is that many citizens do not even know there will be an election. Furthermore, the first time many of those who have prepared to vote will know whom to vote for is when they see the ballot. Thus, they must cast their vote under circumstances of imperfect – or no – information. What kind of democratic political process is that?

Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act says, in effect, that the Black vote cannot be diluted. However, the process of absentee voting alone may dilute the vote of Blacks and everyone else. First, you must write the city election board for an absentee ballot, fill it out and mail it back. Because of the changes in addresses and mail stations

caused by the damage, these two mailings can be delayed up to two weeks, a delay that alone may disenfranchise voters.

Vote dilution could also occur because state law requires first-time voters to register in person. Therefore, if someone wants to vote for the first time and they have been sent out of the state because of the hurricane, coming back to register in person amounts to a modern poll tax, an exorbitant expense for attempting to exercise the right to vote, much worse than the old poll tax of \$2.50.

It gets worse.

If you get a ballot to be executed by absentee vote, because of the avalanche of candidates seeking to replace Mayor Nagin and others, the ballot is expected to be approximately 25 pages long. Of course, a ballot 25 pages long is a recipe for vote dilution, because many people, rather than struggling through it, will throw it in the trash or procrastinate until it is too late to send it back.

Although my eyesight is not what it used to be, I still know a rat when I see one

and this rat has been arranged to exclude tens of thousands of Black voters in order to turn the city of New Orleans back over to the city with a White majority. So, the question is whether the civil rights community, well-intended though it may be, should cooperate with this racist political strategy.

I know it's hard. We've all been taught to vote, almost under any and all circumstances. But that is something that has been difficult for me to do, because there comes a time and a circumstance when there are larger issues. Here, there is the issue of the integrity of the Voting Rights Act itself, which is at stake, at a time when we are fighting for its reauthorization. Should we approve of the kind of reauthorization that violates the Act; should we not fight for pre-clearance by the Justice Department; or should we hold fast to the standard of justice expected by those who fought for it in the first place? I say hold fast.

Most important, should we be complicit in helping to sell the victims of Katrina down the river again, by urging them to participate in an election that will violate the very spirit of democracy represented by their numbers? There can be no justice election under the present circumstances and those who would re-take the city of New Orleans have designed an election to ensure that outcome. By protesting this vote, at every step, we are on the right side of history, the Voting Rights Act and justice for the victims of Katrina.

Ron Walters is the Distinguished Leadership Scholar, Director of the African American Leadership Institute, Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland College Park. His latest books are: White Nationalism, Black Interests (Wayne State University Press) and Freedom is Not Enough, (Rowman and Littlefield).

NEWS

"Louisiana Unity '06 Rebuild Hope Now Coalition"

Protecting the Right to Vote for Displaced Katrina Survivors

New Orleans, LA – The Louisiana Unity Coalition has announced a series of New Orleans Mayoral Candidate Forums hosted by the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation (NCBCP) in partnership with the National Urban League (NUL). These non-partisan forums are part of NCBCP's Unity '06/ReBuild Hope Now Campaign's Katrina Survivors Voter Empowerment Weekends, designed to afford displaced New Orleans residents with opportunities to remain engaged in the electoral process.

Four separate forums are scheduled in cities wherein an abundance of New Orleans residents currently reside. Please note the following dates and locations:

- Houston, TX on Saturday, March 25, 2006
- New Orleans, LA on Friday, March 31, 2006
- Atlanta, GA on Saturday, April 8, 2006
- Baton Rouge, LA on Saturday, April 15, 2006

The first of the four part series will take place at the Saint Johns United Methodist Church, 2019 Crawford Street, in Houston, Texas. The full day of event will take place from 11:00 am – 7:00 pm, with the Mayoral Forums beginning at 3:00 pm.

Besides providing a platform whereby residents may engage the mayoral candidates, Unity '06/ReBuild Hope

NOW partners will, as part of each Voter Empowerment Weekend, educate and instruct New Orleans residents on the Absentee and Early Voting process. Additionally, participants will have the opportunity to gain insightful information on other pertinent topics such as redevelopment plans, environmental concerns, insurance, their health and education.

The forums will be moderated by Norman Robinson, New Orleans' WDSU TV6 News Anchor and George Curry, editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service. Candidates running for the other elective offices will also be provided with an opportunity to meet Expo participants.

New Orleans-based civic and community organizations invited to participate includes among others, Louisiana Unity Coalition, Urban League of Greater New Orleans, African American Leadership Project, United Teachers of New Orleans, Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Neighborhood Development Foundation, New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, New Orleans Affordable Homeowners, New Orleans East Economic Development Foundation, Coalition of Minority Contractors of Louisiana, Louis Armstrong Jazz Camp, Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus, The People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Committee, New Orleans' NAACP, Louisiana Data News

Weekly, V.O.T.E., Ashe' Cultural Center, People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, and the New Orleans Local Organizing Committee.

National organizations supporting this initiative includes; SCLC, 100 Black Men of America, Atlanta Urban League, Houston Coalition For Black Civic Participation, Houston Area Urban League, National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, The People's Agenda, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Alabama Coalition on Black Civic Participation, Institute of the Black World 21st Century, Houston Coalition on Black Civic Participation, Black Leadership Forum, National Council of Negro Women, National Newspaper Publishers' Association, National Pan-Hellenic Council, Operation Hope, NAFEO, The S.O.S Coalition, NAACP, International Association of Black Fire Fighters, The Advancement Project, International Association of Machinist & Aerospace Workers, Communication Workers of American, AFL-CIO, Hip Hop Caucus, APRI, Common Cause, Center for Civic Participation, CBTU, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, Black Youth Vote, National Black Caucus of State Legislators, Blacks in Government and Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

The Unity '06/ReBuild Hope NOW Campaign is the most comprehensive

umbrella effort currently being undertaken by African-American led organizations to address black voter turnout and protection in the New Orleans 2006 municipal elections, in addition to focusing on other important issues such as relief, recovery, and rebuilding in the Gulf Coast region relative to the catastrophes of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

The National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, Inc. (NCBCP), through its 80 member organizations, 12 state and local affiliates, and strategic partners, serves as an effective convener and facilitator at the local, state and national levels of efforts to address the disenfranchisement of African Americans and other marginalized communities.

The National Coalition established the ReBuild Hope NOW Campaign to assist its affiliates, members, partners and sponsors, in sustaining a long-term disaster relief, recovery and rebuilding effort in the communities destroyed and/or adversely affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the Gulf Coast Region. ReBuild Hope NOW's primary goal is to provide a prolonged effort, for as long as necessary, to assist and support the millions of survivors of this catastrophe, most especially African Americans, poor people and the underserved, begin the long painful task of rebuilding their lives.

To learn more as to how you

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NATIONAL NEWS

continued from page 7

that they gave the public and troops the flawed impression that New Orleans was out of control.

"Some would say that I'm a fool to, at night, come in here and hang out with the Fourth Estate. But I see it as an opportunity to engage," Honore told the chuckling audience of publishers and guests at a D. C. hotel. "Normally, the press will look at a bus to tell you what's going on... In this case, some of the media put themselves on the bus and you did some hasty reporting. You did some reporting that gave the impression that the city was out of control. Well, the city was full of poor people that needed help. And they were victims that needed assistance," he said to applause. "Who suffers more during acts of nature such as a hurricane, such as a storm, such as a blizzard? The people who suffer more in most cases are those who were suffering before the tragedy."

As commander of Joint Task Force-Katrina, the Lakeland, La. native led the Department of Defense' response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. He appeared on a string of national news programs, but made headlines in Black newspapers when he ordered troops in New Orleans to "Get those (expletive) weapons down," making clear to the world that military personnel were on a humanitarian, not a war mission.

Honore was introduced by Terry Jones, a native of New Orleans and publisher of the

New Orleans Data News Weekly. Jones' home and newspaper were destroyed in the flood.

Jones said, "I appreciate, admire and hail you for all the great things that you've done for our city. Thank you."

Franklin, one of the country's foremost historians, is best known for his classic book, "From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans," now in its seventh edition. Black Press historian and NNPAF board member Clinton Wilson lauded the 91-year-old for his lifetime contributions to Black history.

"If our society gave as much media play and coverage to persons with great intellectual depth and wisdom as has given to great athletes, then we would know as much about Professor Franklin as we know about Michael Jordan and Willie Mays," Wilson said. "Dr. Franklin's accomplishments rank in that magnitude among academicians."

The dapper Franklin, remarkably spry at 91 years old, opened by announcing, "I think that I deserve this reward for reasons you may not know."

The Newsmaker of the Year is the top award given during Black Press Week. Previous recipients have included Jesse Jackson Sr., Colin Powell, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Dick Gregory, Maxine Waters, C. DeLores Tucker, Army Brigadier General Vincent Brooks and Illinois Sen. Barack Obama. This year marks the 179th birthday of Black newspapers and the 66th anniversary of NNPA.

Talk Back!

Data News Weekly wants to know what you think!

Each week, Data News Weekly brings you the information we think you want to know. In an effort to better reflect the thoughts of the community, we are offering you Talk Back. Take this opportunity to let your community, government officials and our editor know what your opinions are on the subject. Selected submissions will be published in the Data News Weekly Talk Back section and a compilation version will be sent to the candidates for Mayor for the City of New Orleans.

This week's question:

What are the characteristics that are most important to you as you consider your choice for the next Mayor of the City of New Orleans?

Send your comments to:

Talk Back, Data News Weekly, PO Box 5033, Atlanta, GA 30302

Or send us an email at dnweditor@bellsouth.net

Or visit our website www.ladatanews.com

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NATIONAL NEWS

The Business of Staying in Business after Katrina Gets Harder

KATRINA SERIES - PART 5

This is the fifth of an 8-part series of stories about the Gulf Coast and the road to recovery after Hurricane Katrina.

By. Zenitha Prince
NNPA Special Correspondent

BILOXI, Miss. (NNPA) – Hezekiah “Hezzie” Watts stood in the glare of the midday sun looking at the shattered remains of his life’s dream, H.W. Marine Repair, a boat repair and service company that he started 15 years before. It was not a large company, it comprised just him and an assistant, but it was his.

“This was a dream of mine and it was going well,” Watts said. But that was before Hurricane Katrina tore through the Gulf coast, leaving destruction and mayhem in its wake. Now, H.W. Marine Repair was nothing but a hollow shell.

“It’s a total loss. Because of the damage to the building itself, the city engineers came in and said...we have to tear it down and rebuild it completely,” Watts said.

Watts’ story is the story of many Black business owners in the Gulf States, whose businesses were adversely affected by one of the worst storms of the century.

To the west, in the Crescent City, the situation is even worse. Of the 9,747 Black firms in New Orleans recorded by the last U.S. Economic Census, many are not expected to return.

“We’re going to lose a lot of Black businesses, there’s no doubt about that,” said

James Washington, vice president of Hewitt-Washington Architects and Planners and president of the National Organization of Minority Architects. “We were suffering economically down here prior to the hurricane. Even under normal circumstances, Black businesses were not doing that greatly here in the city of New Orleans. A lot of those people, who evacuated to other cities, they’re seeing better opportunities, they’re seeing a



The shattered remains of Hezekiah Watts’ life’s dream.

different way of life and a lot of them are going to choose not to return to the city.”

And for those companies that choose to stay, the road to recovery will be fraught with difficulties.

Hewitt-Washington was one of the premier Black firms in New Orleans. It built most of the schools in New Orleans and participated in the building of major projects such as the convention center, the sports arena and the aquarium.

“We’ve participated in the building of several of the major buildings that have been built in New Orleans in the last few years,” Washington said. “We have a reputation of delivering projects on time and within the budget. We’ve had the reputation for 28 years of being just a solid design firm.”

Yet, for all its stellar reputation, the firm is still suffering.

“We actually have not worked since the Friday before the hurricane,” Washington said. “We were on the brink of signing

some major contracts, [now] all of the work we had has been put on hold. We think that we’ve lost about \$1.5 million in fees because of contracts being cancelled or put on hold.”

Part of the problem is that all of FEMA’s \$1.8 billion clean up and rebuilding contracts were pounced upon and divvied up among politically-connected fat cats such as Haliburton and its subsidiaries, Bechtel, Fluor and the Shaw Group, even before the flood waters receded. Washington said he even submitted an application to Shaw to work as a local architect, but has not received a response.

“All of the work that’s being done right now in New Orleans in terms of the clean up and construction is going to a lot of companies from out of town,” Washington said. “You see people from all over the country that are coming here to participate in clean up and rebuilding. I have not seen any significant involvement of African-American firms.”

Besides being deliberately cut out, Black firms have sustained significant damage to their infrastructure and severe depletion of human resources, which cripples their ability to compete with other firms, Washington said.

“[The hurricane] destroyed most Black businesses. I’ve been in contact with everybody from funeral homes to contractors, a lot of equipment is under water, they don’t have the ability to get new equipment to participate in the rebuilding effort right now,” Washington said. “It’s hard to compete when you have to evacuate. A lot of the folks who own those businesses had to evacuate and it’s hard to get people to come back to work to restart the firm.”

Washington’s own employees have been scattered across the South and farther, he said, and he does not have the facilities to house them even if they did return. And the insurance adjuster has gone AWOL, so he cannot even depend

on insurance compensation to repair the damage to his building. In the meantime, Washington said, he is trying to come up with a plan to ensure the company’s survival.

“I’m not earning cash so I’m going to have to see if I can put some sort of loan package together to get some cash to resume operations because certain bills are going to continue whether you are active or not—the telephone is still on, the electricity is on, the water is on, I have car insurance on the company vehicles, professional liability insurance—I still have my overhead that I have to find money to pay for even though we’re not functioning,” he said.

Rebuilding his marine repair business from the ground up is proving equally difficult, Watts said, especially since boats are considered luxury items.

“To shut down totally is extreme, it’s hard,” Watts said. “Because of the hurricane most people are not using the boats right now so we have to operate on what we have stashed away.”

Despite the looming challenges, Watts said he is hopeful that his dream will be rebuilt.

“When I started, I trusted in God and it seems simple that whenever I run into a problem or things slow down and I talk to him straight up: ‘Dear God, my parking lot is getting empty, I need some boats in here,’ [that] sometimes before the end of the week, I would get five, six boats in here.”

In the meantime, Watts said he filed for unemployment. He also filed for insurance compensation and for FEMA assistance.

“And now I wait.”

SPECIAL SECTION

Bishop Vashti McKenzie Passed up her Vacation to Mobilize the Black Church

KATRINA SERIES - PART 4

This is the sixth of an 8-part series of stories about the Gulf Coast and the road to recovery after Hurricane Katrina.

By. Zenitha Prince
NNPA Special Correspondent

BALTIMORE (NNPA) – Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie was preaching at the funeral of Rev. James Shannon in Memphis, Tenn., when she began to hear rumblings of a potentially devastating storm in the Gulf. She had come to expect news of that kind since moving to the southern 13th African Methodist Episcopal District, and like many seasoned Southerners, met the reports with the sort of equanimity that comes with knowing that it was never as bad as you think.

At the time, her uppermost concern was whether she would make it back to the East Coast for a much-needed vacation with her husband.

"We knew the hurricane was coming, but we didn't think it was going to be that bad," McKenzie recalls. "I remember wondering if we would be able to fly to the East Coast since flights are usually delayed or cancelled in this type of weather."

McKenzie was exhausted from a sustained period of organizing several conferences and performing all the other tasks associated with being an AME bishop. She was eagerly anticipating the cool trickle of wet sand between her toes, the soothing buffet of a Chesapeake Bay breeze and some time alone with her husband to celebrate their wedding anniversary, which was a day or two away.

But in the coming days, all those plans were shot as the horrifying drama of Hurricane Katrina unfolded. McKenzie spent those days with her ear glued to the phone – coordinating relief efforts in her district and elsewhere, and seeking news of lost family.

Meanwhile, her eyes were transfixed on televised images of battered houses and frantic Americans seeking shelter on rooftops, in attics, on bridges and in the Superdome from the roiling miasma of floodwater, sewage and petroleum that was slowly burying the city of New Orleans.

In the media frenzy that followed, however, McKenzie felt like something was missing.

"It just seemed that our stories just weren't being told, and the stories that were being told, there was a particular slant to it," she said. "People were going through hell – that's the best way to explain it."

"They were trapped on roofs for days; they were trapped on the top floors of apartment buildings; parents had to give up their children because the [rescue] boats couldn't take everybody, so the kids went first; families were being separated; people had to leave their homes without their medication, identification, without food [and] clothes. And [yet] they survived. I'm not seeing that story anywhere."

McKenzie said she also failed to see another story: the way the Black church stepped into the breach and saw to evacuees' needs while federal and state officials floundered or otherwise ignored the disaster.

"The role of the Black church was not seen at all on television. Our churches were feeding hundreds of people every day, paid for hotel bills, clothing and other kinds of essentials that are not provided by our governmental agencies. Where was that story?" McKenzie questioned. "That just



Bishop Vashti McKenzie

wasn't being told.

"You had people in forgotten areas outside New Orleans – Lake Charles and other small communities. You saw the Red Cross ride to the rescue in the major areas, but out in the outlying areas, this wasn't happening."

"[But] when it looked like the government had forgotten our people, the Black church had not," McKenzie said. "We were there. We were there at the beginning, we were there in the aftermath and we're still there now."

As McKenzie continued to confer with pastors in the devastated areas about the needs of the churches and people there, she began to collect stories.

Then, at the behest of Jesse Jackson, president of the Rainbow/Push Coalition, McKenzie convened a Sept. 19 conclave of representatives from major Black denominations like the AME, African Methodist Episcopal Zion and Pentecostal churches; the Progressive

National Baptist Convention; and the Nation of Islam; and officials from FEMA, the Red Cross and the U.S. Department of Justice.

At St. Andrews AME Church in Memphis, they heard testimony from about 200 people who had been evacuated or otherwise affected by the storm. They were poor people, elderly, sick and mostly Black, and their stories were heart wrenching.

"I kept listening to the testimony from these people and I thought, 'Their stories need to be told. What they went through needs to be documented,'" McKenzie said.

So McKenzie started putting a plan into action. She called around to different churches – across denominations – and to different community organizations seeking donations. Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, the AFSCME union, the AME Church, the National Council of Churches and others were major contributors to the project, along with other individual churches, McKenzie said.

She also contacted several Black media organizations – the Afro American Newspapers, the National Newspaper Publishers Association, Mitch Media, TV One and others – to share in her vision and help publicize the untold stories.

"I thought if we were going to tell our story, we were going to tell it through our stuff, our media," she said. "My vision was to be able to pull together several layers of media – print media with TV media with radio media – same story going almost the same time, so that we can reach the people. If I'm reading it in my newspaper

and I'm seeing it on television, then maybe I just might get the point."

In mid-October, a crew comprised of a field director, field producer, photographer and two journalists spent two weeks in Louisiana and Mississippi, the two worst-affected states, conducting hundreds of interviews and capturing yards of film to chronicle Katrina's survivor stories.

There was the tale of an old woman who, left alone in her home to fend off the storm, quoted Scripture and praised God for the clothes on her back, all that was left of her life.

There was also the little girl who had seen too much and was left to imagine the fate of her friends; the pastor who one day cooked enough food to feed hundreds; and the engaged couple who packed all they could salvage into a station wagon and headed to Texas to start a new life.

Untold stories, McKenzie said, that exemplify the triumph of the people of God and of the human spirit.

"When you see people who have lost everything and they manage to hold on and say, 'We're coming back, we're getting up out of this, this hasn't beaten me,' and you're getting mad because you're caught in a traffic jam, those things become trivial now when you see people who have beaten these odds."

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Protect Our Right to Return and determine how and when our neighborhoods will be redeveloped.

Meet the candidates for mayor, city council, and other races in the municipal elections scheduled for Saturday, April 22, 2006 in New Orleans. Come to the Empowerment Expo to learn more about plans to rebuild our neighborhoods and our city, our public schools, our hospitals, our churches and who will provide jobs and economic opportunity for you and your family to return to our beloved crescent city of New Orleans and learn how you can Protect Your Right to Vote from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in their Voter Empowerment Trainings.

New Orleans-based co-hosts include: Lower Ninth Ward Homeowners Association, New Orleans Local Organizing Committee, Urban League of Greater New Orleans, African American Leadership Project, United Teachers of New Orleans, African American Leadership Project, Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Neighborhood Development Foundation, New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, New Orleans Affordable Homeowners, New Orleans East Economic Development Foundation, Coalition of Minority Contractors of Louisiana, Louis Armstrong Jazz Camp, Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus, The People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Committee, New Orleans' NAACP, Louisiana Data News Weekly, Voice Of The Ex-offender, Ashe' Cultural Center, Millions More Movement and People's Institute for Survival and Beyond.

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