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Are we witnessing gentrification in New Orleans?

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ARE WE WITNESSING GENTRIFICATION IN NEW ORLEANS?

BY

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Supervising Instructor (Print and sign name)

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Reasoning for volunteering my spring break to the residents of New Orleans:

My initial reaction to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina was pure anguish and consternation. I was stunned that our government did not step in and intervene immediately to help the citizens of New Orleans who were in desperate need of support. I began to question our government's commitment to its constituents, particularly in the event of calamity. American citizens were dying right in front of our eyes on television, and I felt helpless. There was nothing I could do but just watch in despair. More importantly, many of the citizens in New Orleans died due to the breaking of the levees; this could have been prevented if the correct measures were followed when these levees were constructed. In areas that are more affluent, the levees are able to withstand much higher levels of pressure from wind and water. Fortunately, Canadian search and rescue teams were on the scene swiftly and were an enormous help to the residents of the Gulf Coast, but where were the search and rescue forces of the United States? That is a question that we cannot disregard because we must hold our government accountable for their intolerable reaction to this American tragedy. Therefore, I felt an obligation to advocate and help our fellow citizens whom were directly affected by Hurricane Katrina.

My Project: In addition to this written component I conducted two oral presentations for classes in the school of social work at Eastern Michigan University.

The Journey to New Orleans: On February 23, 2007 a group of social work students (including me) left Michigan in route to New Orleans, LA. We departed from the student

center in 6 minivans on a mission to help rebuild part of New Orleans during our spring break. On our way to New Orleans I did not know what to expect, however I was under the impression that because it has been a year and a half after Hurricane Katrina struck, the living conditions in the area would be much better now. In addition, there has been little to no media coverage on the condition of New Orleans, and this must mean that the circumstances in this area have drastically improved.



Volunteers gathering to depart for New Orleans at the Student Center.

School of Social Work's mission at EMU: "The Eastern Michigan University Social Work Program is committed to the empowerment of poor, oppressed, vulnerable, and underserved populations; the creation of social welfare policy based on a strengths

perspective; the advancement of community problem solving; and leadership in organizations and communities” (Gunther, 1999). As a student in the social work program at Eastern Michigan University I have a responsibility to adhere to the school’s mission, and question the response time and quality of service that was provided to the residents of the Gulf Coast. This includes, but is not limited to, the efficiency of the evacuation plan, resources made available for residents after Hurricane Katrina, and the accessibility of basic human needs. This trip to New Orleans would present me with an opportunity to apply all of the different theoretical perspectives I have learned in the social work program and carry out the work for which I feel so passionate.



EMU Social Work students volunteering at a local elementary in St. Bernard Parish Gentrification in New Orleans: Gentrification is “the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces earlier usually poorer residents” (Webster, 2006). Through the use of unobtrusive and qualitative field research I was able to gather information that supports

the idea that there is an attempt to gentrify parts of New Orleans. Unfortunately, gentrification is a major issue in New Orleans. It is regrettable that residents have already lost all of their possessions, and now must deal with developers as well as some governmental officials who are trying to take their land away from them. I was extremely perplexed to find out that this land grab would be going on in New Orleans after all the dreadful conditions the citizens of this area were forced to endure. This despicable attempt by greedy investors to remove residents from their homes inspired me to assist with the rebuilding process and advocate for these citizens locally.



“We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” (Congressman Richard Baker)

I believe using qualitative field research, as a method to collect my data was extremely interesting. There are many strengths of using qualitative field research, such as: being able to interact with people, which puts a face on your participants, the ability to read facial and body expressions when interviewing subjects, and a higher likeliness to

receive feedback in comparison to indirect interviewing methods. On my first day working in the Ninth Ward, I was able to engage an older African American gentleman who was living in a FEMA trailer. The trailer that he was living in was slightly longer than a full size Ford F-150. This man was at home when Hurricane Betsy (1965) and Katrina struck his neighborhood. Fortunately, I was able to put this man at comfort, which resulted in him opening up to me. This gentleman stated that he feels devastated and betrayed by the way the government handled this catastrophe. He feels that the government failed the residents on a local, state, and federal level. The gentleman continued by explaining to me that he heard an explosion before the levees broke. I briefly heard about this idea before my trip to New Orleans but did not pay it much attention. This gentleman explained to me that if the government would not have blown the levees, the areas downtown would have been seriously affected. He informed me that the water in the Mississippi River runs parallel to the levees in the downtown district. Therefore, the explosion in the Ninth and Lower Ninth Ward would release pressure of the levees in the downtown district. This began to make sense to me because New Orleans is known as a world-famous tourist destination, and the loss of the downtown district would be devastating to the city's revenue.

The gentleman was living right next door to a house that Habitat for Humanity was building. He explained to me that he was not receiving any help from the non-profit agencies in the area such as Habitat for Humanity. This gentleman was living in a FEMA trailer while a brand new house is being built right next door to him. His home needed to have some drywall and wood removed, due to the black mold caused by the hurricane. However, he was unable to receive any help in the renovations that would make his home

livable again. This gentleman has still not received any money from his insurance company or the government to rebuild his home.

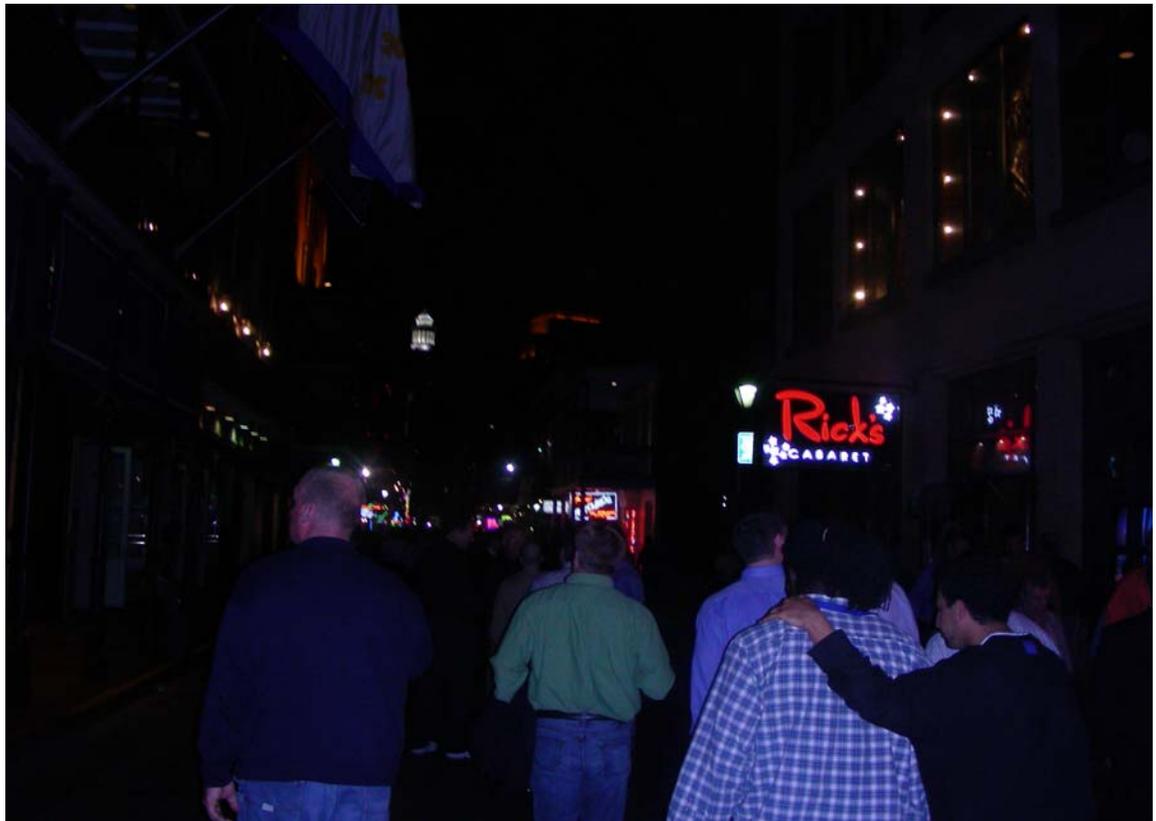
The conversation I had with this gentleman provoked me to ask questions and speak with some other residents about their feelings and thoughts. I approached one of the Habitat for Humanity group leaders and began asking him questions about the criteria for acquiring the houses we are building. The group leader stated that the houses were being sold for \$75,000 with an interest free loan. I asked him if there are any other guidelines like credit or background checks. He responded by saying that potential home owners would have to pass a credit check. This astonished me because it began to seem like this area was going to be changed into a mixed income neighborhood, meaning the low income residents that used to reside here would be forced out. This really struck a nerve with me and caused me to notify my colleagues about the possible gentrification we had heard so little about in the media. Collectively, we began to canvass the neighborhood and look for residents we could speak to.



Sadly, many parts of New Orleans currently look like this

The first gentleman we found was an elderly African American that appeared to be experiencing some symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder that was forcing him to use alcohol as a coping method. He explained to us that he was trapped on his roof for a three-day period with no food or water. When he was finally rescued, he was taken to the overpass on the I-10 highway where many evacuees were. He continued by explaining to us that he is currently renting a 2 bedroom home for much more than he was paying for his 3 bedroom home before Hurricane Katrina, because there are not any habitable places available. There is high demand for houses, but a low supply of them, which means that the prices for the habitable homes in the area will be too costly for low-income residents. Once he finished his story, we thanked this gentleman for his time and moved on.

The final resident we spoke to was very informative and gave us some additional insight about the neighborhood. This gentleman also believes the levees were blown and heard an explosion before the levees broke. He stated that the government was concerned about the levees breaking in the downtown district and felt that blowing the levees in the Ninth and Lower Ninth Ward would make more sense because those people do not have any political clout or money. He continued by explaining to us that there have been numerous investors coming to New Orleans to exploit the land. Later, this gentleman briefly told us about Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and how they believe the levees were blown back then to ensure that the business district survived. He enlightened us by explaining the rich culture New Orleans has, due to the diversity that is found in this area.



The business district is up and running

This gentleman emphasized that the New Orleans experience would not be the same if the lower class citizens were pushed out of the area because of the unique heritages that these residents display during Mardi Gras and the makeup of the city. Finally, we thanked this gentleman for his time and decided to go back and talk to our group leader about some of the data we were able to obtain from the few residents in the area. Fortunately, our group leader was very receptive and agreed to find us a different site to volunteer at. She was able to locate two different sites, which were Project Hope and Andrew Jackson Elementary in St. Bernard Parish. St. Bernard Parish is located right next to the New Orleans Parish and was also viciously struck by Hurricane Katrina. I was excited to have the chance to volunteer in the school system because I love to work with children and interact with faculty. However, it was important for me to keep in mind that many of these kids have endured so much because of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. I decided to volunteer my time in the gymnasium with the physical education teachers and they were delighted to have me.

I was able to speak with 2 of the physical education teachers about their personal experiences regarding Hurricane Katrina. First, I spoke with an older Caucasian woman who was forced to evacuate with the rest of her immediate family. During the confusion of this process she lost touch with many of her family members and friends. Her immediate family decided on going to Baton Rouge, LA in order to elude the hurricane. She described to me how congested the highways were and the puzzlement being experienced by evacuees. Luckily, they were able to avoid the hurricane and make it to safety. However, when they returned to St. Bernard Parish to view the aftermath caused by Katrina, they were disheartened. She explained to me that her insurance company was

blaming part of the damage done to her home on “wind damage” in order to avoid paying her the complete amount to repair her home. This woman asked me to raise awareness about the economic disparities that the residents in southern Louisiana are still experiencing. More importantly, she asked me to advise people in Michigan to write letters to their congressman expressing their concern in relation to their fellow citizens in the Gulf Coast.

The next physical education teacher I spoke with about their personal experiences, in regards to Hurricane Katrina, was an older African American male. This gentleman was also forced to evacuate and decided to take his family to Shreveport, LA. He was in utter shock when he saw that his home and neighborhood were totally demolished. He permanently returned shortly after the hurricane in order to help open up a school where residents could return and bring their children with them. Unfortunately, the FEMA trailer provided for him and his family was too small, so his family is still in Shreveport, LA. Later, he explained to me that he also believes the levees were blown to save the downtown district. He told me that they did the same thing during Hurricane Betsy in 1965. Surprisingly, this gentleman was very optimistic and feels that the residents’ perseverance will overcome any obstacles presented by greedy investors or government officials in the near future.



This picture was taken a year and a half after Hurricane Katrina (3/1/07)

The last person I spoke with about their personal thoughts regarding Hurricane Katrina was a young Caucasian woman that was volunteering from the University of South Carolina. She is currently in the graduate program and felt passionately about completing her internship in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. I found her to be very intelligent and compassionate concerning the horrific conditions the residents of the Gulf Coast were forced to endure. I asked her what she thinks about the idea that the levees were blown in the Ninth and Lower Ninth Ward. She explained to me that she believes the levees were blown due to the immense revenue the city would have lost if the downtown district was completely destroyed. I was stunned that she felt that way about the issue since she was not even a resident of the Gulf Coast. Yet, she explained to me that she has collected some data about this issue and feels that the levees were blown

intentionally. Also, she stated that there are many different things that the local government is doing to take residents' property, like charging them \$100 a day for not keeping up with the maintenance of their home (i.e. cutting the grass, weeds, shrubs). I applauded her for sacrificing so much in order to volunteer an immense amount of her time to the residents of the Gulf Coast.

I was able to use the method of qualitative field research with six different participants and gather pertinent data regarding possible gentrification in southern Louisiana. I was demoralized to discover that our government could have possibly blown the levees in the Ninth and Lower Ninth Ward in order to protect the downtown district. More importantly, the idea of imposing all of these stringent restrictions to deter residents from returning to New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish, in order to exploit the land for its wealth, is appalling. I was pleased that many residents from the Gulf Coast area are standing their ground and not allowing these greedy investors to take away their houses and communities.

For my qualitative field research I was able to use what I saw with my own eyes, but the unobtrusive research was based on other people's accounts and opinions of the situation. I was able to locate some unobtrusive research that was done on the process of gentrifying New Orleans, but since the process of gentrification has not been proven, there are issues with the validity of this information. However, I found several similarities between Robert Bullard and my field research regarding different techniques

that are being used to gentrify New Orleans. According to Robert Bullard, the following are tactics the developers and government officials' are using:

“First, FEMA’s grant assistance program favors middle-income households. Second, screen out and deny black households disaster loans. Third, insurance companies will categorize a lot of legitimate wind claims as flood or water related. Fourth, redline black insurance policyholders. Fifth, requiring rebuilding plans to conform to flood proofing codes that can price many low-income homeowners out of the market. Sixth, allowing no cleanup or partial cleanup- industrial standards- of Black residential neighborhoods. Seventh, sacrificing “low lying” Black neighborhoods in the name of saving the wetlands and environmental restoration. Eighth, promote a smaller, more upscale and “whiter” New Orleans. Ninth, revise land use and zoning ordinances.” (Bullard, 2006)

Many of these techniques are being put to use throughout New Orleans, especially in the Lower Ninth Ward. I was saddened to find out that many of these same methods are also taking place in several areas across the United States. One of the most successful techniques being used is by insurance companies. They are blaming the wreckage on wind damage instead of flood damage or vice versa, depending on what the homeowners' insurance coverage is, so that they are not held liable for the repairs.



Unauthorized demolishing of residents private property

Another technique I found to be common, which was mentioned above, is that in some parts of the Lower Ninth Ward they have already zoned areas as inhabitable. In New Orleans, the rental prices have increased by an estimated 75% (Williams, 2006).

Currently about 90 to 92% of the Lower Ninth Ward is vacant. Many of the residents that were displaced were only provided a one-way ticket to another location. This has caused New Orleans residents to be stranded in parts of the country with no financial resources to get back home. Finally, while I was in New Orleans I witnessed partial cleanup in the Lower Ninth Ward in comparison to the complete cleanup in more affluent neighborhoods.

My commitment to the residents of New Orleans: Since I have returned to Michigan, I have attempted to raise awareness of the horrific conditions that are still being endured by residents of the Gulf Coast. Unfortunately, it has been over a year and a half since Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and the amounts of economic disparity that still exist are mind-boggling. I was infuriated to find out that greedy investors, as well as government officials, are trying to push low-income residents out of New Orleans after they had experienced such a tragedy. I performed 2 oral presentations for the school of social work program at EMU. This was a way to stimulate discussion about the critical issues being faced by Gulf Coast residents. I highlighted a few of the different tactics I witnessed that are being implemented to gentrify parts of New Orleans. During my presentations, I heavily emphasized that gentrification is a process many researchers believe will be accomplished in parts of New Orleans, if immediate action is not taken. Fellow United States citizens are being forced out of their neighborhoods after this major disaster, instead of being helped to rebuild their homes and communities or compensated for their losses as in other areas of the United States, where major disasters have occurred. Many Americans are concerned about the mistreatment of the Gulf Coast residents, but they are not taking enough social action initiative to, make certain that the attempt of gentrification is un-successful. As I mentioned above, we as an American society have an obligation to ensure that all of our citizens are properly cared for and given immediate assistance during a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina. I have made, and will continue to make, announcements in all of my classes stating that the conditions in the Gulf Coast are still awful and gentrification is a possibility in parts of New Orleans. Overall, I believe this was a humbling experience that opened my eyes to the

perseverance exemplified by the residents who are affected by Hurricane Katrina, and highlighted the horrendous living conditions that are still being endured due to slow or non-existing governmental assistance.



A boarded up school in New Orleans

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