

# Responsive Philanthropy

NCRP'S QUARTERLY JOURNAL

SUMMER 2015



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*Construction in New Orleans.  
CC image by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.*

## Philanthropy's Response to Katrina: A 10-Year Perspective

Local responses in anticipation of Hurricane Katrina's tenth anniversary have been decidedly mixed. Some who lived through the storm and its aftermath are anxious. They expect many of the images and stories in the media to be painful. They have their own memories of homes and neighborhoods destroyed and loved ones lost. Some harbor a

grief that has never cycled through its stages or been properly resolved.

Others see an opportunity to show the city in its glad rags, having come so far in so many ways from the destruction that millions witnessed on their television sets or read about in their newspapers. The new levee system makes New Orleans one of the best-protected coastal cities in the United States. There's a strong ecosystem for entrepreneurs. The city is open for business.

Certainly, one of the casualties of the storm will be a nuanced account of what happened in the 10 years after Katrina made landfall. Our assessment of the progress New Orleans has made

By G. Albert Ruesga

since 2005 will be shaped (some might say distorted) by our own agendas. Let the reader beware. My own prejudices and obsessions will become apparent soon enough.

### THE PHILANTHROPIC RESPONSE TO KATRINA

The official Katrina@10 observances will rightly commemorate the individuals who lost their lives and livelihoods in the storm. During these somber occasions, we'll remember the citizens who left the region and never returned, and we'll count our own lucky stars. We'll also take the opportunity to thank once again the *(continued on page 9)*



challenging grantmakers  
to strengthen communities

# Philanthropy's Response to Katrina

(continued from page 1)

individuals, families, foundations, church groups, businesses and others who contributed so much to the reconstruction and rebirth of New Orleans. Thousands of volunteers still come back year after year to put up houses or paint ramshackle schools. I still get choked up when I see them walking back to their hotels from their labors. People in their cars honk at them and wave in appreciation.

I've been a frequent critic of the philanthropic sector. I've poked fun at pompous CEOs and bloviating program officers.<sup>1</sup> In the spirit of self-improvement, we can legitimately raise the question of whether or not, in response to Katrina, organized philanthropy did the right things in the right measure.<sup>2</sup> We can justifiably ask what \$3 billion in private contributions from foundations, corporations and individuals accomplished for New Orleans' most vulnerable citizens.<sup>3</sup> I'm happy for the field to engage these questions, but prefer that this happen some other time, perhaps some other place. For me, as for many, the space we reserve for commemoration is hallowed ground, and I don't yet have it in me to engage in these debates.

More pressing, I believe, is the question of why, when current realities are as harrowing as anything we might have witnessed 10 years ago, we lavish so much attention on the past. If a normally constituted human being had eight fingers instead of 10, I assure you we'd have a two-year head start on forgetting, once again, the lessons of 2005.

## A TALE OF TWO ZIP CODES

Rather than drag the reader through the entire chamber of horrors, let me focus on a representative statistic,<sup>4</sup> published three short years ago in a report titled *Place Matters for Health in Orleans Parish*:<sup>5</sup> "Life expectancy in the poorest zip code in the city is 54.5 years, or 25.5 years lower than life expectancy in the zip code with the least amount of poverty in the city, where it is 80."

I leave it as an exercise to the reader to determine which of these ZIP codes is predominantly Black and which is predominantly white.

And I invite the reader to slow his or her headlong rush through this article and allow that one statistic to sink in a bit. Twenty-five and a half years. The difference in life expectancy between males and females in the United States is currently about five years. This, in my view, should be enough to get everyone's attention. Perhaps, like me, you've wondered why this difference in life expectancy hasn't generated more hand-wringing, more conference panels, more calls to action. A 10-year difference in life expectancy should be nothing short of a national scandal. A 15-year difference should be unthinkable.

But a 25.5-year difference? Here we have a kind of Katrina unaccompanied by torrents of rain. Here's an implacable flood driving the poor in our city to deaths that are obscenely premature.

What kind of healing do we need to feel the full weight of that solitary number: 25.5? What can foundations do to help trouble the water a bit, to quicken our pulses at the idea that our neighbors

might be dying 25 years before we do?

Ten years ago, I watched events in New Orleans unfold from a safe distance. I was living in Washington, D.C., at the time and my fellow Washingtonians and I clucked our tongues at the images on our TV screens. Some of us remarked that 'there but for the grace goes Washington, D.C.' We shared a sense that Black lives appeared to matter as little in our nation's capital as they did in the American South.

A life expectancy of 54 and a half years. Is there perhaps some way that philanthropy can help us remember the present as vividly as we recall the past?

## A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER<sup>6</sup>

If you work in a foundation, if you have the privilege of funding the good people who help us remember the present, please know that much is expected of us. A higher consciousness, a greater sense of urgency, a more robust response to current suffering and injustice.

Years ago, I sat at a long table lined with academics, one of whom described the research he had just conducted on the role of philanthropy in the Civil Rights Movement. It turns out that foun-



A wall on Highway 90 in Gulfport, MS. CC image by Jewish Women's Archive.

dations had generally been circumspect and very slow on the draw.<sup>7</sup> They came around eventually, as they did with many progressive movements, when all the difficult work had already been done. And even then, they played a minor role.

I, the self-appointed spokesman for organized philanthropy, was indignant. I knew personally of many foundations that had taken risks to advance the cause of social justice. Here, I had in front of me yet another uninformed foundation-basher. But still his thesis gnawed at me, and the more I tried to negate it, the more clearly I saw how the exceptions proved the rule.

The Movement for Gender Equality, Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring – we let them spend their rage and bury their dead. After that, we convened them and funded those who knew how to speak to their betters. This was photo op philanthropy, the kind that smiles for the camera as it places one foot on a trophy that others had the courage to bag.

The foundation response to Katrina was very different. Hundreds of foundations across the country and across the world mobilized to help put New Orleans back on its feet. They made huge investments in relief and rebuilding efforts; they gave voice to beleaguered residents; they helped us rebuild better than before. Here was philanthropy at its best. Not photo op philanthropy, but rather a response from the heart that has lasted to this day and has transformed our city. I know the overwhelming majority of my fellow New Orleanians share my gratitude for the generosity of so many.

The problems with organized philanthropy – the work of foundations and the like – are more systemic; they extend far beyond our attempts to respond to any one disaster. These problems explain why it's the pope, rather than a foundation CEO, who's deemed by Fox News to be the most dangerous person on the planet.<sup>8</sup>

For now, dear reader, dear fellow philanthropoid: If you're moved to do so, make your pilgrimage to New Orleans this year. Give us an opportunity to thank you again. We can mourn together for the dead. And, most importantly, arm in arm, we can find a way to honor the dignity of those who are thankfully still with us. ■

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## Notes

1. The editors at the White Courtesy Telephone blog have much to answer for.

The following are some of the grantmakers that provided crucial support after Hurricane Katrina.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation  
 Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund  
 Conrad N. Hilton Foundation  
 Ella West Freeman Foundation  
 Ford Foundation  
 Foundation for Louisiana  
 (formerly the Louisiana  
 Disaster Recovery  
 Foundation)  
 Greater New Orleans  
 Foundation  
 JPMorgan Chase  
 The Kresge Foundation  
 The Needmor Fund  
 Patrick F. Taylor Foundation  
 Rockefeller Foundation  
 RosaMary Foundation  
 Reily Foundation  
 Surdna Foundation  
 W. K. Kellogg Foundation  
 Zemurray Foundation

- See: <http://postcards.typepad.com/>.
2. Pablo Eisenberg, "After Katrina: What Foundations Should Do," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, January 2006, <https://ncrp.org/news-room/news-2006/233-after-katrina-what-foundations-should-do>.
  3. Steven Lawrence, "Snapshot of Philanthropy's Response to the Gulf Coast Hurricanes," Foundation Center, February 2006, [http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/katrina\\_snap.pdf](http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/katrina_snap.pdf).
  4. For a broader picture of "inclusion" in the New Orleans metro area, see: *The New Orleans Index at Eight: Measuring Greater New Orleans' Progress Toward Prosperity*, the Data Center, August 2013, [http://www.datacenterresearch.org/reports\\_analysis/the-new-orleans-index-at-eight/](http://www.datacenterresearch.org/reports_analysis/the-new-orleans-index-at-eight/). *The New Orleans Index at Ten* will be released shortly.
  5. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Orleans Parish Place Matters Team in conjunction with the Center on Human Needs, Virginia Commonwealth University Virginia Network for Geospatial Health Research, June 2012, <http://www.orleansplacematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CHER-Final-text.pdf>.
  6. Parts of this section appeared originally in a blog post titled, "The Philanthropic Undead and the Untimely Death of George Falconer," available at [http://postcards.typepad.com/white\\_telephone/2013/07/voices-from-stonewall.html](http://postcards.typepad.com/white_telephone/2013/07/voices-from-stonewall.html).
  7. There were some notable exceptions. See Sean Dobson, "Freedom Funders: Philanthropy and the Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1965," National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, <http://ncrp.org/campaigns-research-policy/36-campaigns-research-policy/1081-freedom-funders-philanthropy-and-civil-rights-movement>.
  8. Dan Arel, "Fox News calls Pope Francis 'the most dangerous person on the planet,'" Patheos, June 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/danthropology/2015/06/fox-news-calls-pope-francis-the-most-dangerous-person-on-the-planet/>.