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NATIONAL news

HURRICANE KATRINA

Queer problems, queer responses

by Sarah Dougher

As we all struggle to comprehend the destruction and suffering wrought by Hurricane Katrina, the inequities already infecting our culture seem to take on a life of their own as the waters recede. Poverty, racism, homophobia all rise to take a new place in the lives of people who have lost everything and are forced by circumstance to beg or fight for scraps.

The physical destruction of an already weak infrastructure will have a particularly harrowing effect on queer families, since Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana have repressive laws governing queer relationships.

Mississippi and Alabama have "defense of marriage" laws that deny rights to queer couples, and Louisiana has amended its constitution to ban same-sex marriage as well as deny legal status for common law relationships, domestic partnerships and civil unions.

This means the already difficult situations of loss of life and property, not to mention displacement, are exacerbated by laws that prevent queer partnerships from being recognized across a wide variety of social and legal situations.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, for example, is prevented by the federal Defense of Marriage Act from providing family benefits to same-sex-headed families. Social Security benefits for spouses are similarly denied. Adoptive relationships between parents and kids that are legally recognized in other states can be denied, and children can be taken and put in foster care.

Medical visitation and decision making is not guaranteed to same-sex couples, and neither are the rights to make many decisions regarding death or funeral arrangements.

Even if a couple have their papers in order, documents such as a living will or a power of attorney may not be valid in the state where then couple end up after evacuation.

Fortunately, the Red Cross has been on the forefront of serving queer families ever since the aftermath of 9/11. In addition, an organization called the Rainbow World Fund pairs relief activities with humanitarian service agencies and national institutions to fund and support existing relief efforts.

The fund recognizes that because of Hurricane Katrina, many survivors are homeless and in need of food, safe drinking water and medical care. It is estimated that tens of thousands will need temporary housing for months to come.

The fund is accepting donations to help the survivors of Katrina with food aid. Contributions will go to America's Second Harvest, the nation's food bank network, which says at least 10 food banks and hundreds of related agencies were hit by the hurricane. Donations made to the fund will be used to provide meals and groceries, transport food to survivors and secure additional warehouse space to assist food banks in resuming and maintaining operations.

Many organizations have stepped forward in an effort to specifically help queer evacuees of the storm. In collaboration with many organizations around the country, the National Youth Advocacy Coalition has launched the Hurri-



Hold-out revelers take part in the Southern Decadence parade Sept. 4 in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The gay festival was called off in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

cane Katrina LGBT Relief Fund to ensure that queer youth and families, among the most vulnerable members of the community, receive the critical support they need to regain stability in their lives.

Contributions to this fund are tax-deductible and will support humanitarian relief for queer youth and families from the devastated areas. These funds will be distributed directly to local organizations in the best position to ensure strategic and high-impact disbursement of the emergency funds. As a first step, the Houston Area Teen Coalition of Homosexuals and Montrose Counseling Center hosted one of a series of special support groups Sept. 6 for the refugees to help them manage their stress, grief and fear. The National Youth Advocacy Coalition will be shifting its own resources to be there on the ground to offer support and assistance to local organizers.

Partner organizations include Basic Rights Oregon; Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere; Equality Federation; Family Pride Coalition; Mautner Project; National Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Centers; National Black Justice Coalition; National Center for Transgender Equality; and National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs.

In addition, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is providing resources for people wishing to donate funds and help survivors in need of the most basic support or for those seeking services in their area. Its Web site is www.thetaskforce.org/katrinaaid.

Also included on the NGLTF Web site are resources for people from the affected region who may be in need of direct services, including information about how queer community centers in the region are assisting people displaced by the hurricane as well as resources to meet the needs of HIV-positive individuals.

The resources on the site will be updated regularly with additional resources, including a page of guidelines detailing how to make shelters safe for transgender evacuees.

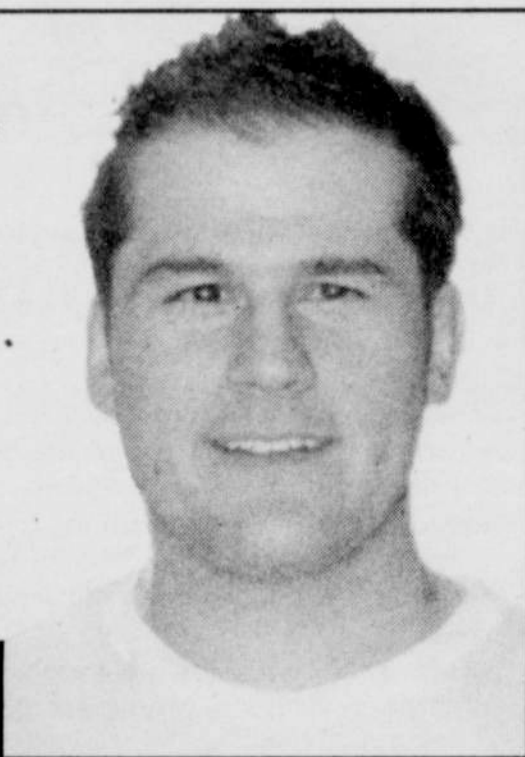
In addition, the Human Rights Campaign (www.hrc.org) has compiled a substantial and growing list of resources for queers on the Gulf Shore and in Texas.

This Web site has an oft-updated list of resources for Katrina evacuees and those who wish to help: www.pageoneq.com/news/2005/Katrina_gay_080505.html. 

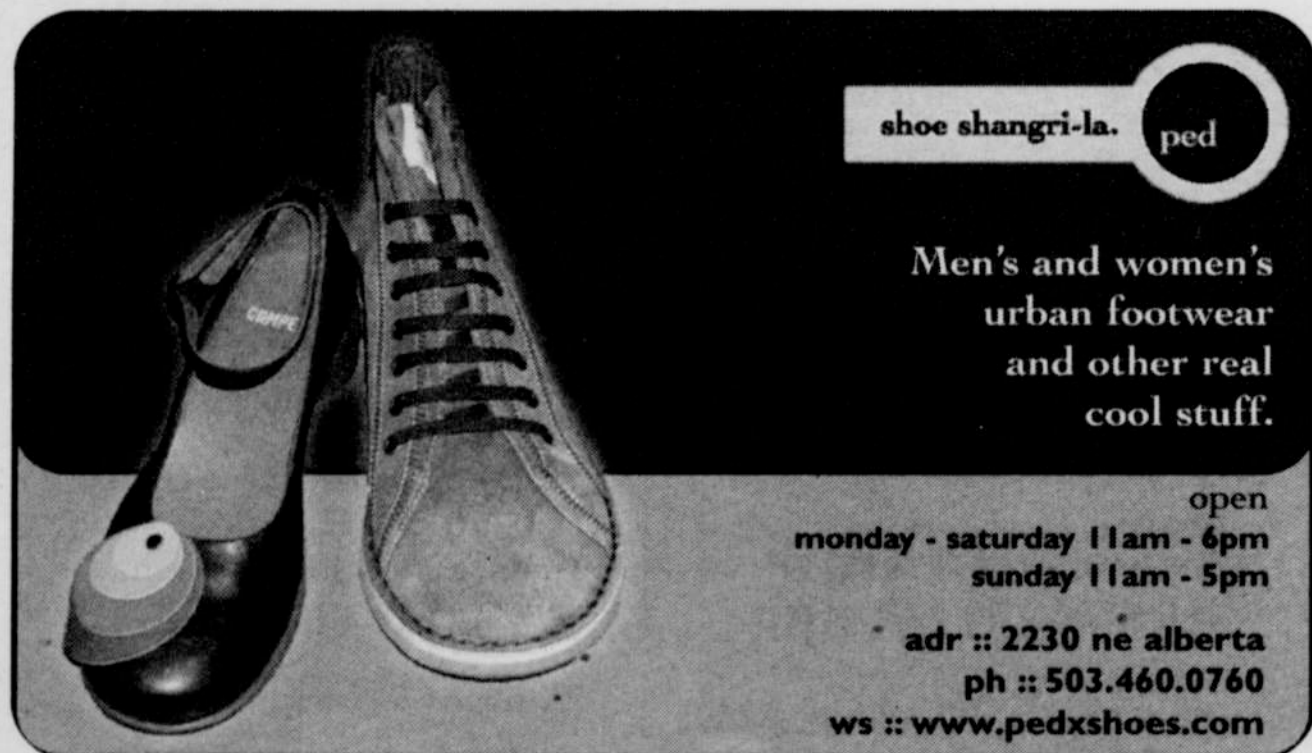
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