

OPINION

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Katrina Aftermath: An Unnatural Disaster

Institutional racism hit us as well

BY EMMA DIXON

When Hurricane Katrina tore up the roof of my house, it didn't care that I'm black. My white neighbors, like my black neighbors, saw trees fall on their homes and saw their refrigerators rot and mold. They, like I, lived without electricity or phone for over a week after that color-blind natural disaster.

But an unnatural disaster hit us as well, the institutionalized racism that began centuries ago. The flooded areas of New Orleans were three-quarters black, while in dry areas African Americans were a minority. Over the years, many well-off white people have left the city for gated suburban communities. The remaining whites tend to live on higher ground.

The unnatural disaster of racism swept away the savings accounts and credit cards with which poor black people could have bought their escape. A century of Jim Crow laws barred black families in the South from certain schools and jobs. Social Security benefits were not available at first to domestic and agricultural workers, the occupations of most African Americans at that time. Due to discrimination, most black World War II veterans were unable to use the GI Bill, which gave most white veterans the homeownership and college educations that have made their children and grandchildren so prosperous.

The unnatural disaster of racism swept away the cars with which poor black people could have escaped Katrina. Almost a third of residents of the flooded neighborhoods did not own the cars on which the evacuation plan relied. If the promise to the freed slaves of 40 acres and a mule had been kept, then six generations later, their descen-

dents would own more assets, and the mule would now be a Buick.

Nor has this unnatural disaster abated today as I learned from my own experience. Almost immediately after Katrina hit my town, I saw spray-painted signs warning that looters would be shot and killed. I was warned by a white neighbor not to move

first-hand racial discrimination in gas lines and in food and water distribution lines by a police officer.

The world noticed that the evacuees stuck in the SuperDome and those turned back at gunpoint at the Gretna bridge were mostly black. But who noticed that the first no-bid federal contracts went to white businessmen, cronies of white politicians?

It's hard for me to believe, but this persistent racism is invisible to many white people. A Time Magazine poll taken in September found that while three quarters of blacks believe race and income level played a role in the government response to Hurricane Katrina, only 29 percent of whites felt the same.

The color of money is green, but the color of poverty has a darker hue. Families in the flooded black neighborhoods of New Orleans had a 2004 median income of only \$25,759 a year, barely more than half the national average. Why? Louisiana is a low-wage, anti-union state. Many workers

have pay so low that they receive public housing and food stamps. New Orleans voters made history by approving a citywide living wage in 2002, but a court blocked it, allowing poverty wages to continue.

Last week I drove home to Louisiana. In my neighborhood I hear the constant buzzing of chain saws removing uprooted trees, and the sounds of hammering as roofers repair endless numbers of damaged roofs. The fragrances of PineSol and bleach tinge the air as residents attempt to save refrigerators and rain-soaked carpets. I thank God that my family and I survived the storm and that the recovery has begun.

Yet I ask myself when the other recovery will begin.

Katrina revealed the racial wealth divide in New Orleans and the unnatural disaster that caused it. When will we rebuild our society so that everyone, regardless of race, has the means to escape the next disaster?

Emma Dixon of Mandeville, La. is a financial literacy educator with United for a Fair Economy.

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around too much lest I be mistaken as a looter.

When my daughter came to get me from my damaged house and drove me to her home in Indiana, we were turned away by a white motel clerk in Illinois on the pretext that there were no vacancies. A later phone call confirmed what their sign said, that rooms were available. I also experienced

Protecting Our Children and Senior Health

Healthcare system needs national solution

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Most Americans feel the sting of rising healthcare costs. But those most hurt by the skyrocketing medical fees, pricey prescription drugs and expensive insurance premiums are society's most vulnerable: children and seniors.

Both federal and state governments have introduced legislation intended to make healthcare more accessible, but confusion in federal law and a lack of funding for state proposals prevent these initiatives from making a big enough impact. A national, comprehensive and uniform health plan is needed to ensure America's most fragile citizens are protected.

Last Wednesday marked the beginning of the new Medicare prescription drug plan. But instead of being excited about the new change and the seemingly vast amount of options to them, eligible senior citizens



The poor state of America's healthcare system directly affects the African-American community.

are confused.

Before deciding on one of the several dozen plans available, seniors must first figure out which plans work with other state and federal assistance programs. Then, they have to

enrollment penalty, adding deadline pressure to an already confusing and stressful selection process.

The change in Medicare's prescription drug plan isn't the only healthcare-related reform happening in the country. Gov. Rod Blagojevich, D-Ill., has introduced his All Kids plan, which makes affordable insurance available to the children of working parents. In Massachusetts, the legislature is negotiating competing plans to cover all of the state's half-million uninsured residents. Oklahoma recently started to enroll small companies and their staff in a program that would offset insurance premiums for company paid health insurance.

While the state plans are encouraging, it's simply not enough. The healthcare system cannot be repaired state by state. Reform has to begin at the national level.

People of color have a lot at stake here. The vast majority of black children and

seniors are un- or under-insured. By advocating for a comprehensive, nationally funded health plan, we can ensure our community's most valuable resources — our youth and our elders — are cared for.

According to recent data, uninsured African-American children are 20 times more likely not to receive the medical care they need. Parents aren't able to take their children for regular check-ups and a variety of medical issues go undiagnosed. The poor state of America's healthcare system directly affects the African-American community; for us, making sure the system is reformed is, literally, a matter of life and death.

In the meantime, take advantage of the resources that are available — studies show that many of those eligible for subsidized healthcare programs don't enroll. If you're a senior and you need help figuring out the new Medicare drug program, call 1-800-633-4227 or visit www.medicare.gov.

Judge Greg Mathis is chairman of the Rainbow PUSH-Excel Board and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Reality for Too Many People

Nearly a half million people turn to Food Bank

BY RACHEL BRISTOL AND RON JOHNSON

As we have all seen in the past weeks, poverty is often invisible until a catastrophe exposes it for the world to see. Yet poverty and hunger are realities every single day for too many people in our state.

In the Portland area alone, an estimated 540,000 people turned to the Oregon Food Bank's Portland Metro Services for food assistance last year.

The Food Bank's just-released statistics on "The State of Hunger" in Oregon show that more than 2.2 million people in Oregon or approximately one in five residents ate meals from emergency food boxes last year — and that Oregon remains among the 10 hungriest states in the nation. These statistics make it clear that much work remains to be done to help the neediest Oregonians among us.

The good news is that Oregon Food Bank, with the generous help individuals and businesses in this community, continues to

diligently do everything it can to help meet local needs. But with the costs of basic needs in Oregon — such as housing, childcare, medical bills and prescription costs — continuing to rise while federal dollars allocated for food stamps decrease, they need your help more than ever.

We urge you to please contact Oregon Food Bank's Portland Metro Services at 503-282-0555 or www.oregonfoodbank.org to learn more about the ways you can help the most vulnerable members of our community, such as:

Donate Money: The Oregon Food Bank can multiply every dollar donated by recovering and distributing food. Your donation can also help fund programs that address the root causes of hunger.

Lend a Hand: Whether you can help assemble emergency food boxes, transport food to those who need it, or sort and pack donated food, volunteers are always needed.

Pull Together a Team: Get oth-

ers involved to help stop hunger in Oregon. Ask your company for support through sponsorships or a gift-matching program. Consider starting an annual food drive among members of your family, community, faith group or co-workers.

Make Your Voice Heard: Contact your local and federal representatives to express your support for federal programs that make a big difference in the fight against hunger. It's an important way to help ensure that the neediest among us have a voice.

We shouldn't wait for a disaster to hit the Northwest before we take local action; poverty and hunger are realities every single day for too many people in our state. We urge all Multnomah County residents to take action today, because no one should be hungry.

Rachel Bristol is the executive director of the Oregon Food Bank and Ron Johnson is chairman of the organization's board of directors and vice president of Portland General Electric.

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