

Southern Women's Voices from the Gulf Coast States on Hurricane Katrina

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a compilation of ten interviews with women ranging in age from twenty to seventy. The women are from New Orleans, Gulfport, and Biloxi. The ethnicity of the women are African American, Caucasian American, Austrian-born Caucasian, and Jewish. The women were identified and asked to participate in a study to offer their opinions and experiences about Hurricane Katrina as residents of Gulf Coast states. Women are sometimes overlooked or not heard. This essay gives women a chance to speak openly and frankly with their own voices.

The media has referred to the people who were involved in the Hurricane Katrina disaster as everything from victims to refugees, however, in this article they will be referred to as survivors.

INTRODUCTION

Southern women are known to some as the prissy belles who follow their husbands around and answer to their every beck and call. But this article will reveal a different side of Southern women. This article will acquaint you with women who have a voice and are willing to say what they feel and think about what happened during Hurricane Katrina and what needs to happen so that the Gulf Coast states can recover. This nature of the Southern women is referred to by many in the South as "the backbone of the culture." These women are often overlooked, but there are a few brave souls who heroically are willing to share their survival stories.

This essay compiles ten interviews with women ranging in age from twenty to seventy. The women are from New Orleans, Gulfport, and Biloxi. The ethnicity of the women are African American, Caucasian American, Austrian-born Caucasian, and Jewish. The women were identified and asked to participate in a study to offer their opinions and experiences about Hurricane Katrina as residents of Gulf Coast states.

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The women were asked a series of questions, and some of their answers are included. For example, the women were asked if surviving the disaster had changed their lives and, if so, how. They were also asked what they think the long-term recovery plan for the Gulf Coast states should entail. After interviewing these Gulf Coast states' hurricane survivors, several themes emerged. This essay will include direct quotations from the women as they relate to the themes that surfaced.

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was that racial and socioeconomic factors played a major role in the response to Hurricane Katrina. We have chosen to let the women speak for themselves. Some of their responses are below.

SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD CAUCASIAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

Well, if citizens from Cape Cod would have been affected or were begging for water that would not have happened. Would they have them living in tents and sleeping on cots outside for two months? Frankly, I don't think so. How about the residents of West Chester, New York? Neglect was what I saw on television from New Orleans. Affluent areas wouldn't be treated that way I don't think or rich residents who live along the California beaches. I don't think so. Would the response have been so slow or just no response at all for days? I don't think so.

FIFTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

Yes, especially in New Orleans. The project area where most Blacks live was hardest hit.

I think the response would have been very different if prime property owners who had money were where the Blacks were. Politics played a key role in the way people were treated. FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] was there before the storm—Wilma or whichever one it was—hit in Florida, and they still have offices open now for long-term recovery for the Florida hurricane survivors. Florida had three or four hurricanes this past season, and the response there was very different from the response in New Orleans.

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

Yes, because the areas that were most impacted by the flood were the low-education and mostly African American areas. They're not trying to get the Black areas of the city back up. They are just thinking about the French Quarter and lake area and not working on the Black parts—the Black parts of all classes, even high-class African American areas. Lakeview is upper and middle white. [They are] not focusing on a majority of New Orleans. Most of New Orleans is Black. So they are not focusing on where the people of New Orleans came from.

TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD AUSTRIAN-BORN NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

Honestly, I do think it played a role in the response. I think that the poverty in New Orleans has gone on for so long and hasn't been an issue because the people are

mostly African American, and it just seemed that sort of New Orleans was just this dirty little secret that no one wanted to see, and the hurricane happened, and again these people got ignored.

FIFTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

People were disadvantaged and poor, they didn't have the means or money to leave, and some had no place to go. People were not given good information. I think if Katrina had hit and affected mostly elite people, the response would have been just the opposite of what happened to the poor people—what we all saw on television.

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

Wow. I want to say yes, just for the simple fact that when you think about 9/11 and how fast the government response was. We have the power to come into an area that is filled with water. I do think it was especially a poverty thing. It was the poor that were left and couldn't get out. It was almost as if they were expendable to the government. If it were people that were important to the community or were necessary for the functioning of the city, they would have done more. The poor were not going to be missed. They weren't major contributors to the society. I hate to pull the race card, but, yeah, it was why.

A second theme that emerged was how the women survivors felt Hurricane Katrina had personally changed their lives. When we asked the respondents questions sometimes their voices broke as they were speaking. This emotional response was due to the fact that many of the women had been personally affected or knew someone who had been directly affected. Some striking comments from respondents include that Hurricane Katrina "leveled the playing field," and "There is a greater sense of community even though we are shattered." Over half of the respondents said that their religion, faith in God, church, and prayers helped them survive. We again allow the women to speak for themselves.

TWENTY-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHER AND NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

Being separated from my family is the worst. My family is all relocated. I mean, my husband is in New Orleans, my sister in Alabama. Dad's in Canada, and I'm here in Lake Charles with the baby. This makes no sense.

TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD JEWISH NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

It sounds cliché. It's been a stronger sense of family and the importance of people. And I spent a month thinking about how all my possessions are gone, and I reevaluated everything I had—thinking I'd lost all material things. And I think just living back in the city you have to not let the little things make you go crazy because nothing is going right.

And also for me our temple has helped because just coming back and having something to come back to (the people you recognize) has been kind of therapeutic—going back to work too, even though it is stressful. Having a normal, repetitive routine makes a difference—just having something to do.

FIFTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

Yes, Katrina has made me a stronger person. I lost my house. Katrina has taught me to not take anything for granted. Katrina has strengthened my faith in God. I pray more. I never thought I would experience anything like this in my life. I appreciate small things much more now. My privacy is important to me now. I never thought of it before in our own home, but now we are living in a dormitory provided by my job because we are not eligible for help because we had flood insurance. My comfort zone has been totally taken away.

SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD CAUCASIAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

Yes, I have been changed by Katrina. I realized that material things are not important. Family and friends are important. I think it has softened city officials too. I hope it softens senators and national officials. I also realized that it is citizens who make a real difference when a disaster hits—not the government. Major mistakes were made by FEMA. No one was accountable. Children are being neglected by our government. People are living in tents and can't take a bath. I feel sad too that people are living in tents. It's cold here. Every group was affected by Katrina, from the richest of the rich to the poorest of the poor. I never thought I would see anything like this in my life.

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

I don't think it has changed anything about me. I think that if anything it has increased everything I already thought about myself and where I should be going. It makes me think about what was already wrong with New Orleans.

FIFTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

Yes, I have changed personally. I am more grateful, thankful, than before. I feel I have been spared by the hurricane because my son and I were in this house when the storm hit. We did not evacuate because they said the storm was not going to be as bad, but then they changed later that night and said it was going to be very bad, but it was too late, and we had to stay where we were and wait it out. The storm hit a part of my house and blew a part of the roof off. We were definitely spared. I am also more prayerful, and I think of God and church more. I didn't perish. I didn't lose everything like some people I know. The storm was powerful, overwhelming. It took from all, rich and poor. It leveled the playing field in a way, as strange as that seems.

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD CAUCASIAN NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

I have stopped planning ahead. All I thought I had has been taken away. I lost my job, my home. When I was evacuated I didn't know where I would go. You had to live one day at a time. I think the people that returned had a bigger sense of community and belonging. Everyone helps each other out. You can approach each other on the street. I just learned to live with less—content with the little you have left—and I am more appreciative.

The theme of culture was mentioned by almost all respondents. The women had varied viewpoints about the effect on or loss of Southern culture. The women also had differences of opinion about culture depending on whether they lived in Mississippi or New Orleans.

TWENTY-ISH JEWISH NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

The hardest part for me is realizing that New Orleans is never going to be the same. I knew a month ago that it was going to be gone. The racial composition has changed. It saddens me. I loved the diversity. Now it's mostly white and some Mexicans. The city is what it is because of the people, and I worry about what it's going to be in the future.

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

I mean it's never going to be the same. I don't know how long it will take to rebuild. I don't know if it is a priority. All this displacement—is the water even out of the Ninth Ward? People are going to just forget about New Orleans.

SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD CAUCASIAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

I feel a lump in my throat when I leave home each day and see the devastation. It's overwhelming. It looks like an area that has been bombed now. This used to be our home. Now it is gone, wiped out by Katrina.

FIFTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

For the Southerners who had to leave and their families who had to give up everything I think it will be hard. But I believe they will always be Southerners in their hearts regardless of their environment. I don't think they will lose their culture because they are relocated.

FIFTY-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

I do not think the storm will change Southerners. I think it will soften people.

A lot of people were humbled by Katrina. For example, I work with FEMA now, and a lot of older White people who would never be polite or helpful to Blacks say “yes ma'am” to Black people now and “thank you.” They also have told me “thank you for listening to my story. I will pray for you tonight; you have a good day ma'am.” That has never happen to me before, and I have lived in Mississippi all my

life. Prejudice was reduced some, and people pulled together and helped one another regardless of race, especially during the first few weeks after Katrina.

The final theme that emerged was the issue of what to do after Katrina. These women have thoughts and suggestions for local and national officials about what needs to happen to restore the lives of the people of the Gulf Coast states. Within this theme are comments like “the Small Business Association needs to be here to help...without hassles,” “we are living like people in Third World countries,” “there are not enough FEMA trailers,” and “they are not allowing those people to come back home.” Again we allow the women to offer suggestions in their own words.

FIFTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

The news on television said the government is not going to rebuild the projects in New Orleans, then where will the people live? They will probably make it prime property now by rebuilding condos by the water for high-income residents. But a plan for recovery needs to start now. This year’s hurricane season has been predicted to be [the] worst. Insurance costs will increase, adding more debt or cost to residents who have nothing now. Tropical depressions, global warming will have an effect on the Gulf Coast states again as it always does. The government needs to stop holding people’s hands. Staying in hotels and on cruise ships is not going to last. People need to start now to think of a long-term plan for their families. People need to consciously think about this. Counselors need to start talking to people about careers, new businesses, and the Small Business Administration needs to be here to help them without hassles. About FEMA...people shouldn’t have to call around and try to figure out the FEMA system during a disaster. They should use local people and probably the churches as the main centers and distributor sites as points of information. Also, insiders and outsiders should be a part of the solution and what happens next for two reasons: Number one, insiders who have been affected are so subjective based on what happened to them and people they know that it clouds their judgment about the issue sometimes. I think insiders will be excellent for providing strategies that work best if a storm hits and especially in the first stages of the devastation. But, number two, outsiders need to be a part of the long-term plan too because they are objective and can suggest things that people who experience the tragedy may not think of.

TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD CAUCASIAN NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

We need people to come back to our city so the economy can come back and the school systems and businesses. We need FEMA trailers on our properties until we can rebuild. The government should do more.

SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD CAUCASIAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

Congress needs to forget politics and help us. They came to the aid of New York so now they need to come to the aid of the Gulf Coast states. People are still suffering

here every day. Funds need to be designated to help Katrina survivors. Politicians need to come to the Gulf Coast states and see this disaster just like they went to New York. They need to be held accountable for coming or not coming to help the Gulf Coast states too. They need to hire the mayor of Biloxi and other leaders like him who know what to do when this type of thing happens because of their experience. Katrina survivors need individual help: jobs, homes repaired, new homes, and improved living standards. I still have hope that the most powerful country in the world will do what's right. Those displaced need to be helped. The Small Business Administration [SBA] needs to help people figure out viable businesses to open and fund them without giving them a hard time. The SBA's leadership and policies need to be reviewed and waived so that some of these people can get back on their feet due to the magnitude of Katrina. The Federal Government and Congress need to stop dragging their feet. Now is the time for action. People need help today.

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN NEW ORLEANS RESIDENT

They focus too much on rebuilding the business areas. But no people of the city are there. They are not worried about cheap housing for the poor people to come back home. My mom said that the projects downtown had no damage. All those people could go back, but they are not allowing those people to come back home. That's some crap.

FIFTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSISSIPPI RESIDENT

The government needs to get more involved in this disaster to help us get our lives back together...rebuild our homes. It is all about rebuilding lives now! They need to try to change and make things better than they were before. New policies need to be in place to deal with a disaster...FEMA was awful. We need to be better prepared to help people when a disaster strikes. Politicians need to come to Mississippi and New Orleans to see for themselves that we are not doing okay down here. The way we are living is substandard...it's like living in a Third World country.

There is a plethora of other valuable comments made by the respondents. Some touch upon the type of support they received following Katrina. Almost all respondents commented upon FEMA's ineffectiveness. A few offered suggestions on how FEMA might plan ahead next time. In addition, respondents said that their family members and people from across the nation came to the aid of the Gulf Coast residents to help their fellow American citizens. Below are a few comments that particularly stood out.

SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD CAUCASIAN FROM MISSISSIPPI

United States senators, congressmen, and women did not become actively involved with this disaster like they did with 9/11 because they could not profit from it. What do I mean? I mean as far as electoral votes are concerned. New Orleans [i.e., the state of Louisiana] has nine, Mississippi has six, and Alabama has nine; New York has thirty-one, Florida twenty-one, Texas thirty-four, and California fifty-five. Congressmen felt they could benefit by going to New York for 9/11, or other big

electoral vote states, but the total number of electoral votes for the Gulf Coast states is twenty-four. So since they can't capitalize...most didn't come to see the Gulf Coast states disaster or offer to help.

FIFTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN FROM MISSISSIPPI

A group of men called the North Carolina Men came and are still here. They have a system that really works well. It's a drive through to get the basics: ice, water, and hot food. They just ask what you need, and how much, then they put it in your truck, and the line keeps moving. It is very efficient and helpful, especially when people are already so stressed out.

FIFTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN FROM MISSISSIPPI

Well, I feel we were penalized by our government (FEMA) because we owned our home and had flood insurance. We were not eligible for any assistance, and we have nothing now. The flood insurance is not doing us any good now! I need help too. We are homeless. We all need help. To discriminate at this stage is just...it's just not fair. FEMA has closed our case two times. They don't tell us why they closed the case when we go back to try to get help. We are staying at my job site now. We will have no place to stay in January. Some people are living in their cars because they don't have a place to stay either.

CONCLUSION

Ending this essay was difficult, and we struggled with how to do it. As we thought of all the comments of respondents, we realized that there had been only one mention of Atlanta, Georgia: a city in a Southern state that has transformed itself and is no longer viewed like the Gulf Coast states. After brainstorming and investigating, we decided that a history lesson was the best way to bring this essay to a close. In 1852, Atlanta's population was 3,000, including some 500 slaves. Because of its location and commercial importance, Atlanta was used as the center for military operations and as a supply route by the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Atlanta became a target of the Union army. General William Sherman and his troops captured the city in 1864. In order to weaken the Confederate military organization, Union troops burned Atlanta to the ground before they moved on. Today, Atlanta is the capital of Georgia and is known for its robust economy and a populace of over 416,000. Katrina leveled the Gulf Coast states, and now it is up to the United States of America to make a decision like General Sherman made. What shall we do with the Gulf Coast states? Shall we rebuild them better than they were before so that they can also reemerge as Atlanta did and take their rightful place as a part of these United States of America? Or do we let the Gulf Coast states die and pretend Hurricane Katrina never happened? Only history will tell.