



# A PLACE BETWEEN HOPE & DESPAIR

**ACTION CAMPAIGNS ▶ EDUCATION  
ANIMAL DISASTER AID NETWORK  
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**NEW ORLEANS:** From February 16-22, 2007, Kinship Circle traveled to New Orleans to aid Katrina-affected animals. Along with roaming animals, we found a story at most addresses on our route.

A wheat-colored dog races toward our vehicle at 1400 Montegut and N. Villere Street. A curious Shepherd mix follows. Behind them, a graying man in rumpled shirt and jeans approaches. He wants to talk. It's been nearly two years since Hurricane Katrina leveled his Chalmette, Louisiana home.

He lives in a makeshift room in his commercial warehouse in the Upper Ninth Ward. When Louisiana State Police tried to evacuate him after Katrina, the man refused to desert Buddy and Baby Girl.

"I have no wife, no children," he explains. "These dogs are my family."

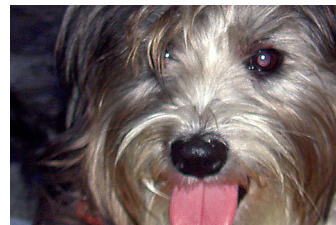
An officer aimed his gun at Baby Girl, forcing the man to leave or watch his dog die. He quickly confined both dogs to an upper level, with self-dispensing food and water to last two weeks.

Floodwaters rose eight feet beneath the dogs. But the man managed to sneak back into the city to retrieve them. "We still live in this 'temporary' warehouse apartment," he confides. "The insurance company I had for 18 years didn't come through for us."

As Katrina's two-year anniversary nears, Gulf Coast recovery progresses unhurriedly. Rejuvenation of infrastructure, debris pileup, demolished structures, levees and wetlands remains tangled in red tape.

In the Ninth Ward west, where Katrina's wrath seems frozen in empty doorsteps and board-covered windows, occasional new homes rise from rubble. Two black cats dart between dilapidated buildings and overgrown lawns.

Nearby, Mary Michelle emerges from her tiny shotgun style home to offer us cold Cokes. At age 90, she resettled in New Orleans after an eight-month evacuation. Her first cat died in Katrina's floodwaters. She now cares for a feisty calico who bolts from a footstool to greet me.



Mary apologizes for the mold-infested carpet she cannot afford to replace. Where is the aid, she wonders, to replace her waterlogged belongings? "At my age, honey, Louisiana is my last home," she says. "Thank you for helping our animals."

## BETWEEN HOPE & DESPAIR

Any story about companion animals reflects the people who loved or abandoned them. Hurricane Katrina stranded an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 domesticated animals in New Orleans alone. These numbers don't account for other parishes or Mississippi. By some guesstimates, 600,000 or more pets struggled alone in Katrina's aftermath.

Before Katrina, Louisiana's spay/neuter rates were among the worst nationwide. The storm scattered unaltered pets and ferals over a chaotic landscape with ample opportunity to breed.

New Orleans dwindled from a pre-hurricane count of 484,674 (2000 U.S. census) to roughly 200,000 to 275,000 residents. With the population reduced by half, street animals no longer have full trashcans, restaurant throwaway, or other reliable food sources.

Human victims face overwhelming odds too. By early March 2007, Governor Kathleen Blanco's federally subsidized "Road Home" program had supplied 630 rebuilding grants, even though 107,000 qualified homeowners applied. While Congress, the Army Corps of Engineers, state and municipal governments debate overdue legislation and funding, displaced residents wait for Small Business Administration loans, insurance claims and other fiscal support.

According to a recent review from the nonprofit Institute for Southern Studies, New Orleans and the Gulf Coast are "still in crisis," with some 110,000 families occupying interim government trailers or reliant upon FEMA rental aid. Several cut-offs are postponed to August 2007, yet "tens of thousands have already been cut from the rolls," notes the Durham, N.C. based organization.

Still, a sense of hope pervades. Signs on gutted homes



declare, "We will rebuild." Local contractors advertise, "With you after the storm and now." TV programs air updates from parish administrations.



Kinship Circle's animal aid team includes Marnie Reeder and Liz White of Austin, Texas; Barb Dunsmore, from San Diego; and my husband, Grady Ballard, and I from St. Louis, Missouri. We set-up about 220 food/water stations for cats and dogs left to scavenge in sparsely populated areas.

Our task coincides with Mardi Gras 2007, an event that lures 800,000 tourists to the well preserved French Quarter and Garden District. Jazz, blues and funk spill from brightly lit doorways. Neon skies shine over robust crowds on Canal Street, St. Charles, Poydras and Magazine.

But the city has jagged edges. Across the Claiborne Avenue Bridge, Katrina's surge ruptured the Industrial Canal levee. Here, the Lower Ninth Ward is a bulldozed wasteland. A few homes teeter at cartoon-like angles where the storm uprooted and cast them.

As of February 22, 2007, only two Lower Ninth Ward residents had inhabited new homes sponsored by ACORN Housing, a community advocacy group. "The view from the back porch for Josephine Butler, who lost the house her husband and brother built decades ago, is one of mudholes, a debris pile, crumpled or vacant buildings and tangles of vines," writes Becky Bohrer, Associated Press, in "Katrina-ravaged area gets first new homes."

In Plaquemines Parish, a region bounded by the Mississippi River's east bank and the Gulf of Mexico to the south and southeast, Katrina's winds struck at more than 150 mph. Levees crumbled in a Category 5 storm surge and water gushed in at 20 feet or higher.

I am instantly aware of the absence of sound.

At a house off Buras Hwy. 1, mute CDs and muddy pompoms recall a teenager's room. Mascara, acne cream, and toothpaste faithfully linger in the cupboard of another skeletal home in Pointe Celeste.

Inside a white house where cats find shelter, I stumble upon a dead possum coiled around tutus, Barbie-doll purses, and a pink collar. A sky-blue shirt blinks in pet-rified ruins. I imagine long-ago noise. I see small hands cuddle a happy dog.

And I stand without words, a trespasser eavesdropping on other lives. I weep for the child and dog who will never revisit this room.

## SPRAY-PAINTED HOUSES, CATS AND DOGS

Most buildings on our circuit flaunt the spray-painted "X" rescuers used to communicate with one another. Messages dated 2005 read "SPCA, 2 Dogs, 9-13" and later, "1 cat, F/W, 10-23." DOA indicates someone's companion animal who didn't make it.

"Cats who survived are on their fourth litters since the storm," says Kathy Sweeney, food/water program coordinator for Lakeview, New Orleans. "And their cycles are off. It is non-stop kitten season here." Sweeney speculates 10% of Lakeview homeowners are back since Katrina pounded 7th Street Canal floodwalls, unloading 14 feet of water in this middle class neighborhood alongside Lake Ponchartrain.

Cats huddle under homes heaped in moldy furniture. Dogs wander near the train tracks, Sweeney says. A Chihuahua, Lab and brown mutt form an unusual pack seen at a cemetery since the storm.

Ramona Billot has recovered animals in lower Plaquemines since she returned to her wind-damaged Belle Chasse home weeks after the hurricane. She believes around 25% of evacuees are back, but most no longer search for pets they presume dead.

Yet Billot notes at least half of the 300 or more animals she tracks on weekly feeding rounds are former companions. And the head count is growing. "Dogs and cats multiply continually here because the majority of Katrina survivors were never altered or rescued," she says.

To cope with escalating ferals, Billot leads Plaquemines Cat Action Team (PCAT), formed under Alley Cat Allies, a national feral cat advocacy organization. She and partner Vivian Cotton of PAWS (Plaquemines Animal Welfare Society) work with local government to improve the quality of feral/stray cat populations through TNR (trap, neuter, and return) and other long-term alternatives to euthanasia.



## HOW MANY OUT THERE?

Robin Beaulieu envisions two to three more years devoted to Katrina-related animal aid. "Many animals I see and trap are former pets left behind," she says. "In Gentilly, I recently photographed a Shepherd mix wearing tags and a blue collar. I think there are hundreds more like him out there."

Beaulieu and Charlotte Bass-Lilly head Animal Rescue New Orleans (ARNO), a group co-founded by Jane Garrison, Pia Salk and David Meyer in October 2005 to rescue, feed and reunite displaced animals. As ARNO's original food/water assignments director, I worked with ground director Cadi Schiffer to service 2,800 stations over 650 sq. miles in Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes.

Local Traci Kestler runs ARNO's present food/water program. Beaulieu, shelter director, and Bass-Lilly, executive director, oversee rescue in Louisiana and Mississippi, plus medical triage for the injured, newborn, or abused. ARNO advocates spay/neuter, foster and adoption.

Poop patrol is also top priority at ARNO's full shelter in Harahan, LA. Victoria Clark, 13, shows up in blue hospital scrubs to clean cat cages and freshen litter boxes. Bobbi Lee drives in from Birmingham, AL to scoop poop for canine tenants such as Mr. Shivers, a Chihuahua dumped by a lake, and Gateway, a mushy Spaniel mix fond of kisses.

For some volunteers, the calling requires new digs and lifestyle. Ryan Gares of Madison, Wisconsin lives in his RV Winnebago on ARNO grounds and Tom is a self-described "van camper." Anastasia Crider of Metairie, aka "Cat Lady," is on site daily to comfort traumatized and malnourished felines.

Jackie Quick started out at ARNO's Magazine Street camp in December 2005. He moved to Metairie when ARNO united with Best Friends Animal Society to extend animal relief into 2006. Quick currently resides in ARNO's Plaque Street warehouse, managing the kennel, supplies and special projects.

Quick, who doesn't know when needs will evolve from disaster relief to municipal animal management, says he is committed for the long haul.

## A CAR FULL OF KITTENS

A fog blankets New Orleans the morning of our departure. Kristy McShan of Lafayette, LA meets Kathy Sweeney, Ramona Billot, Grady and I outside ARNO to load 13 cats for our 10-hour trek to St. Louis. Eleven Katrina kitties are destined for Felines Forever, a rescue, rehabilitation and adoption nonprofit in St. Louis. Sammie, a blue-eyed beauty, is headed home to Jill Carles, a childhood neighbor of mine.

And Baby Noah — named for a boat still perched on someone's front lawn with the words, "Noah's Ark" — joins my own family.

Katrina's Diaspora seems never-ending. But for the animals, migration from the Gulf Coast may be their salvation. Financially strapped residents in FEMA trailers can no longer provide for pets. Surrender rates remain irregularly high and adoption rates low. With area shelters filled to capacity, rescue groups hope to transport animals to no-kill shelters nationwide.

"At what point do we stop?" asks longtime Katrina rescuer Pam Leavy. "I have no idea. But this disaster could have happened to any of us. Our own beloved animals could [have been] tossed into the streets. I'd hope someone would look after them, as we are now."

