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The New Orleans I watched suffer from afar is the city I now proudly call home

Michael Fitts

Even before Katrina, the city still had complex problems, but the people here are dedicated to understanding and addressing them

People I talk to in New Orleans have understandably mixed feelings about the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. For some, it's an important outlet for reflection and expression. Some are glad to see attention still drawn to this history-altering event and the many issues it exposed. Others are hoping to pass the anniversary in peace, not wishing to relive the grim days of late summer 2005. As for me, I'm honored fellow New Orleanians welcomed me so warmly and recently to join this still-unfolding story. I arrived last year, looked around, observed the remarkable social fabric of my new home and was immediately moved by what I saw.

When Katrina hit, I experienced it the way most of us did, watching from far way, horrified, helpless, at a loss for what to do. In the bleakness of that time, my imagination dulled by the shock of it all, I couldn't see how New Orleans, one of the great cultural and economic treasures of America - indeed, the world - would carry on. But because of the way the people of New Orleans and of Tulane University responded after the storm, it became the most compelling of destinations, compelling enough for me to leave my lifelong home of Philadelphia to join Tulane as president last year.

The resilience and perseverance of New Orleanians post-Katrina are the accomplishments of a generation. They created a place tuned for civic engagement and innovation, the kind of place that draws people interested in confronting the big problems in the world. Katrina itself, the infrastructure failures it laid bare and the resulting flood delivered nothing but ruin and misery. With the storm's physical threat long gone, what remains is the deepened community engagement, forged by citizens and friends of New Orleans in the aftermath.

As a newcomer, I felt in some ways like Alexis de Toqueville, exploring an intriguing and unusual land. I've met people who still tell their Katrina stories, in detail and largely unprompted. I've heard familiar accounts of decimated homes, displaced families and disrupted lives. Then I realized there was another dimension to the story: there was a new understanding that people who loved this city had to take it upon themselves to save it - a realization that, to thrive in an altered world, we have to help each other. We have to work together. A galvanization, a focus on the greater good, a heightening of civic virtue took hold. In some ways, the culture of New Orleans was primed for this. Mardi Gras might seem like a mere frivolity to some. In fact, it's a deeply ingrained social tradition, a multifaceted platform for New Orleanians to connect with each other in a common - and fun - endeavor.

To be clear, New Orleans still has problems, and complex ones, like cities everywhere. The difference is that the people here have permanently elevated the attention and energy dedicated to understanding and addressing those problems. Tulane witnessed this with its own deeper bonding to the community and shared sense of fate. The university wove [public service](#) into its undergraduate curriculum to a degree rarely seen in higher education. Socially minded entrepreneurship emerged as a force in the city, both in programs at Tulane and from many other groups, as creative nonprofits sprouted across town. Municipal reforms unfolded, public schools [entered](#) an ongoing rethinking and reorganization, neighborhoods redeveloped, enthusiasm and support for new businesses flourished.

None of this was accomplished by Katrina. The lesson for other communities striving to improve is not that it takes a disaster. The answer is in your people and their networks. It's in overcoming divisions. Economists sometimes talk about the paradox of countries rich in natural resources failing to prosper. Countries lacking such resource wealth, meanwhile, succeed by creating better institutions. New Orleanians focused on building their social institutions: schools, community groups, small businesses. Those institutions provide the source of resilience.

So now I'm here, a new New Orleanian, on the 10th anniversary of Katrina, thinking back and looking forward. I see the inspiring progress. I see a city still grappling with education issues, persistent poverty and crime and a dissolving coastline that threatens its long-term outlook. But I also see the tenacity of a truly original culture, a rising hub of innovation and an irresistible appeal for visitors and transplants. No longer am I at a loss about what to do. I'm joining my new neighbors to band together, to think through the problems, to do the work, to keep the focus on making our home better.

