



Rebuilding a Katrina-ravaged community

By Chandra R. Thomas

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Much of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath has largely centered on the lower Ninth Ward area of New Orleans, widely considered to be the epicenter of the disaster.

But as we approach the fifth anniversary of the most destructive and costliest natural disaster in our nation's history, homeowners in the historic African-American community where I grew up in another part of the Ninth Ward are also struggling to rebuild their houses, lives and deeply rooted community ties.

Pontchartrain Park is the oldest planned middle-class African-American community in New Orleans and one of the oldest of its kind in the country. Built during the Jim Crow era of racial segregation in Louisiana, "the Park," as us natives call it, gave black New Orleanians all the benefits of suburbia within the city. With more than 1,000 modest ranch homes, wide curving streets and 200 acres of green space, it included a golf course and later a Little League ballpark and tennis courts.

This community was a safe haven for working-class blacks and, in many ways, shielded those of us in later generations from the harsh realities of racism and prejudice. Somebody once told The Times-Picayune newspaper that growing up in Pontchartrain Park was like growing up on "Leave It Beaver." I can relate.

In an era where American families are often disconnected and scattered across the country, this was always a close-knit community where familial bonds were not only the norm, but they were strong and celebrated.

To outsiders the simple houses may not have looked like much, but when I was a kid growing up the home that my grandparents Elmo and Mildred Williams built on St. Ferdinand Drive was the center of my universe.

It's where our family always came together for holidays, barbecues, seafood boils, birthday parties — and to watch New Orleans Saints games, of course. It's the house my mother grew up in and to where her sisters and brothers came home from the hospital.

Although technically my mom and I lived in Eastern New Orleans, I spent most of my childhood in my grandparents' backyard with my friends playing with our Barbies and practicing for our Pink Ladies and T-Bird Club initiation ceremony. We'd walk to the "highway" (our nickname for the nearby shopping center) to grab a snack or run over to the park to watch my cousins play football and cheer on the Patriots squad.

Every summer there were swimming lessons at Southern University at New Orleans, a historically black college. And long before the name Tiger Woods was a household name, I saw black men and women playing golf on our community golf course (which, by the way, was designed by Joseph Bartholomew, an African-American architect who designed many of the golf courses in New Orleans, but couldn't play on them because of segregation). Once I moved to Atlanta with my mom as a teen, it was especially comforting to return home several times a year.

Everything changed on Aug. 29, 2005, when Katrina overpowered the levees that were supposed to protect Pontchartrain Park. Most of our beloved community was submerged under 6, 8 and, in some parts, 14 feet of water. My immediate family, and everyone else in the Park, lost everything. As the anniversary approaches, it's painful to report that Pontchartrain Park is still not close to where it was before the flood. According to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, just more than half of the households have returned. That means at least 500 families are displaced or may never come back again.

That's why when I accepted a 2010 Kiplinger Public Affairs Journalism Fellowship at the Ohio State University in Columbus, I had no problem deciding what the topic of the multimedia project I would spend six months producing would be. I chose to focus my series of short videos on the rebuilding of the Park in tribute to the Russells, the Guimonts, the Barbarins, the Browns, the Baudys, the Rosses, the Washingtons, the Amoses, the Josephs — the many families of St. Ferdinand Drive who made my childhood there so great.

They did everything right; they worked all their lives, owned their homes, put their kids through school, paid their taxes (and insurance) and now many can't afford to rebuild homes in the very community they helped become one of the strongest and stable communities in America.

Most of all I did my project for my grandmother Mildred Williams, who lived with me for three years in Atlanta after Katrina, while my uncles sorted out the mess of rebuilding. She got sick the day before my cousin John DuCongé of Decatur was supposed to drive her to see her newly remodeled home for the first time.

Like one-third of Pontchartrain's residents, she was a senior citizen who did not have left the many years it would take for the community to be restored. Her condition improved just long enough for my family to throw her a huge surprise 80th birthday party in Atlanta. She died three weeks later at Emory University Hospital. I'd bet a million bucks that her final birthday wish had been to make it back to St. Ferdinand Drive.

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Her multimedia video series on the rebuilding of Pontchartrain Park is online (Wednesday-Sunday) on [TheGrio.com](#)

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