

## Added to the Tally of Hurricane Devastation, a Leader's Parish Post

By LESLIE EATON

CHALMETTE, La. — It took more than two years, but Hurricane Katrina finally whipped Junior Rodriguez.

Mr. Rodriguez has spent 30 years as a political power in St. Bernard, the parish just east of New Orleans that was probably hit hardest by the storm. But last month he lost his bid to be re-elected parish president, and even he acknowledges that the main reason was frustration by the voters at how little their devastated community had recovered.

“I didn’t just run against an opponent, though he’s an excellent politician,” said Mr. Rodriguez, 72. “I ran against a hurricane.”

It is not as if he ignored the storm’s damage. As parish president, Mr. Rodriguez rode out the storm on the roof of the government complex. Afterward, he became nationally known as a peppery and sometimes profane critic of the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s response to the hurricane, not-quite-joking that FEMA had become his favorite curse word. He even helped persuade Washington to close a shipping canal that he had complained for decades was destroying the wetlands that protected the parish from hurricanes.

But his fiery reputation dimmed the longer his parish remained in ruins.

Before the storm, St. Bernard was sort of the Staten Island of New Orleans, known simply as “Da Parish.” It was mostly white, working class, locally famous for its bare-knuckle politics, tight-knit neighborhoods and refineries (mostly oil, some sugar). And its holiday decorations, affectionately satirized by the songwriter known as Benny Grunch (“Santas pose in Elvis clothes, it’s Christmas in Chalmette”).

These days, the parish is just a heartbreak.

If New Orleans’s recovery from the storm has been slow, St. Bernard’s has been glacial. A study of the number of households receiving mail last fall found that only 40 percent of the parish’s population had returned, while in New Orleans 70 percent were back. All but a handful of buildings here were flooded, many over their eaves. Roads buckled and street lights fell, and oil tanks floated loose, contaminating blocks.

Some of the schools reopened quickly, and parish officials say that new families have moved into some of the once-expensive subdivisions. But the sewer system has not been rebuilt, whole neighborhoods remain abandoned, and rows of white FEMA trailers still cover acres.

Driving into Chalmette from the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans, pretty much the first thing that appears is a dead Wal-Mart, and there are few places to shop except “everything for a dollar” stores. The hospital has not reopened.

Down the road, as the more rural eastern end of the parish is known, graves are still tumbled at the Merrick Cemetery in Violet. The entire front wall is missing from the museum honoring early settlers from the Canary Islands, who gave their Hispanic surnames to St. Bernard families like Mr. Rodriguez’s.

Worst of all, many people here say, the floodwaters washed away a whole way of life. Extended families, living cheek by jowl in the subdivisions to the west and the fishing villages to the east, are now scattered.

And they are not coming back. More than in any other area, homeowners in St. Bernard are choosing not to rebuild, but rather to sell their ruined houses to the state, which is likely to end up with 5,200 to 6,000 properties — more than 25 percent of the owner-occupied housing that existed here before the storm. (In New Orleans, that figure is about 7 percent.)

They are people like John Ohler, who goes by Butch and who bought his house in a subdivision here in 1977. He just sold it to the state for \$63,000 and has moved his wife, daughter and mother (who lived on the same block) to Covington, across Lake Pontchartrain.

“I hate to pull out,” Mr. Ohler said. “I feel like a deserter.” But so many things he liked about the neighborhood are gone: the restaurants nearby, the stores, the neighbors.

One of the very few who are back is Richard G. Rabin, whose FEMA trailer is festooned with holiday decorations. “We had contests every year to see who could decorate the best,” Mr. Rabin said, sweeping his hand from one end of the almost-deserted block to the other.

“There’s nothing being done, no progress being made,” Mr. Rabin said. “Now that we have a new parish president, I think we’ll move forward a lot quicker.”

That’s also a common sentiment at Rocky & Carlo’s Restaurant (official slogan: “Ladies Invited”), down near one of the refineries. “I think people wanted a change,” said Tommoso G. Tommaseo, who owns the restaurant with some of his older relatives from Sicily.

Change has not always been a welcome thing in St. Bernard; Mr. Tommaseo’s menu, after all, still lists a Wop Salad (with olives and Parmesan cheese). But while the food has stayed the same at the restaurant, he said, the clientele has changed. Laborers and construction crews fill the place up at lunch, as do volunteers.

And when family groups eat together, it may be because they have made a special trip. Kay Magill did, coming from Slidell to see her sister, Sandra Gorbaty; they used to live just two miles apart.

They faulted Mr. Rodriguez for the slow pace of recovery. “I think he thought that if he didn’t do anything, it would come back on its own,” Ms. Gorbaty said. “That was never going to happen. Fifty years ago, maybe.”

The notion that Mr. Rodriguez’s time has passed is a subtext to many conversations about him. The man who beat him, Craig P. Taffaro Jr., is an athletic 42-year-old psychologist who serves on the parish council, wears tasseled loafers and a goatee, talks about diversity and pledges to work more smoothly with FEMA.

Mr. Rodriguez, officially but rarely called Henry, used to be a seafood buyer and bar owner, and has spent the last two years living in a double-wide trailer behind the parish office building. He is now slow-moving and jowly, wearing cowboy boots and jewel-encrusted belt buckles, and has been caught in the past using racist language, though these days he seems sufficiently subdued that he can be quoted almost verbatim in this newspaper.

The election was nasty and typically colorful; at one point, Mr. Rodriguez’s son ran against him on the platform “I’m Not Junior,” and his wife was almost arrested after confronting Mr. Taffaro.

His fights with FEMA were not just over style; he attracted the attention of federal investigators because of his spending decisions after the storm. But he insists he has laid a good foundation for recovery.

“Nobody appreciated what I did anyhow,” he said, a little bitterly. “All they’re worried about is what I can’t do now, why they can’t get back into their house, why I can’t get the trash out of the street. But that’s life, man, that’s politics, you know? If I had to do it, I’d do it all over again, it wouldn’t make any difference.”