Desolation Row, Part 2

In Part 1, a former Metro staffer found chaos and desperation in his New Orleans homecoming. Now, the conclusion.

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By William Dean Hinton

Photograph by William Dean Hinton

EDDIE SEARS names the number of St. Bernard residents he's heard have died since the hurricane: Ms. Burtha; her twin sister, Ms. Beulah; Topcat; Hudson; Kazoo's brother Warren; and a bunch of young men shot dead in Houston and Atlanta.

One neighbor thought to be dead—but who is still very much alive—is PJ, the owner of the only barroom in the vicinity of the St. Bernard projects. (The others closed years ago because of fist fights and gun battles.) He's a middle-aged, wide-faced man who wears glasses pushed close to his face. On New Year's Day, he is hammering plywood by himself in his dimly lit bar, which he's owned for 30 years.

PJ evacuated to Dallas but realized right away he didn't want to stay long. It was too quiet, and people worked too much.

He expects his bar to be open in a couple of months but isn't so sure about the projects, where his customer base once lived.

He reminisces about the way PJ's used to be, when even female patrons were known to be vicious, attacking each other over nothing more trivial than the attention of a young man. "There were a lot of roughnecks around here," he says. "I had to be ready for however they came at me."

Once upon a time, a white reporter wouldn't have been able to stroll into PJ's as casually as one did this morning. PJ's customers, like the rest of the projects, didn't take easily to strangers. "You

would have had to fight your way in and fight your way out," he says. "But at least you'd have some respect."

He expects that once St. Bernard residents begin to return en masse, attempts to gentrify this part of Gentilly will be difficult. "There will be some adjustments," he says. "This will cause some problems. Mixing blacks and whites will not be an easy thing."

Ministry and Activism

On Hamburg Street, on the east side of the projects, there's a flurry of activity. A legion of quirky volunteers—from Oregon, New York, Arizona, California—have descended on a Baptist church run by Bruce Davenport, a portly, good-natured pastor who stayed behind after the flood for three weeks, wading through the murky water to hand out canned goods to residents who refused to leave.

When I complain that I think my sinuses are gunked up from walking through moldy homes, he waves his hand in front of his face and says he can't tell allergies from colds anymore. They're blended together into a continual sickness.

Davenport is part minister, part activist, part clinician. Besides St. John's, the small shotgun church where he preaches, he also runs two homes that service HIV patients and other victims of the sex trade. ("He's had to bury quite a few patients," one of his neighbors tells me.) He shows me photos of girls, some as young as 11, forced into prostitution by their mothers. He knows women who give free sex as revenge for contracting HIV, and teenagers who use him as a last resort when VD symptoms begin to appear.

"When they can't get rid of the burn, they come see us," Davenport says.

Taking a break from his workday, Davenport walks along Gibson Street, the only north-south artery through the projects. The street is known as Marijuana Lane—not to be confused with Heroin Alley, where Davenport's church and hospices are located, or Crack Boulevard, officially known as Milton Street, which is the east-west artery through the development.

Davenport walks down Gibson fingering bullet holes in the mature oaks lining the street. He grew up in these projects when fist fights, not gunfire, were the way to prove you were tough. Times changed in the mid-1980s, as New Orleans, like the rest of the country, was immersed in the crack trade and the accompanying violence over turf wars and revenge. Only those who double-crossed a hustler were supposed to get whacked, the ghetto version of the Mafia's wise-guy code. But thugs aren't known for practicing gun safety or eliminating the correct target. Mistakes have been made. Innocent people have often been gunned down.

Still robed in a blue contamination suit, Davenport enumerates the St. Bernard residents murdered after being entangled in drug disputes. A young man ambushed in a stairwell. Another shot and dumped in a bed of fire ants. Three young girls shot as their parents ran out a back door. Body parts pulled from a compartment underneath the projects. A woman gunned down while begging for her life. Another young man shot point blank six times while Davenport's small

congregation worshipped inside St. John's. Vendettas against family members unaware their kin had been beefing with somebody.

At the crime scenes, murderers hid themselves in the crowd of spectators, checking to ensure nobody ratted them out.

The one thing you didn't want to do in the projects was get caught slipping, Davenport says. Slipping meant you weren't watching your back for signs somebody was stalking you or someone you were hanging with.

There were so many murders in and around the St. Bernard projects that police installed video cameras on telephone poles to capture the action. Police wanted to videotape from one of Davenport's buildings, but he said no way. "Do you know how many ministers have been murdered for being a witness?" he asks.

As we stroll down Marijuana Lane, a stocky man with dreadlocks pulls up in a white Pontiac. He is a former crack dealer who now paints houses for a living. He gives Davenport a quick hug, looks down Gibson Street as far as he can see and recalls the day he evacuated. "I'd never been in a boat in my life," he says. "It fucked me up."

The man doesn't want his name printed and insists I scratch out comments after I write them in a notebook, especially when he says he was paying $25 rent while earning $500 each week painting houses. "I love my 'hood," he says. "I miss my 'hood. There weren't too many people who could walk all the way through it, but I could."

He says he saw a young man shot down by an Uzi not far from where we stood. Another guy was clipped by an AK-47.

Stolen goods were dispensed in the projects as if it were a giant flea market. "You could buy any kind of weapon," the man says. "As much as you wanted of whatever you wanted. Uzis. AK-47s. Car rims. Sound systems. Put your order in. If you didn't like it, you could return it. Money ran through the projects all day. People thought we were a bunch of poor black folks. But we had money."

Groups of young men calling themselves Hard Headz and Young Gunnerz terrorized the neighborhood. But they were gangs in name only, he says. "There ain't no gangs in here. Just killers."

The man says his goodbyes and turns to leave. Talk of the projects, the drugs and violence, has made him nostalgic. "I don't care how deadly they say it was," he announces. "This is home." Faced with the prospect of losing the projects, he says a $2,300 check from FEMA was meaningless. "If I could," he says, "I'd give it all up to come back."

On the return trip to his church, Car Culture. Davenport says he'd also like to see the St. Bernard projects return exactly as they were before. It is surprising to hear him say this: he told me earlier that he chose to return to his old neighborhood after seminary because he wanted to help,

because he wanted change. He was tired of the projects burying so many young black men. Why, then, would he want the projects to come back exactly like they were, complete with violence, prostitution and drug addiction?

Davenport's explanation doesn't exactly satisfy. He says living in the projects is mostly a last resort for those who refuse to fend for themselves in mainstream society. The projects aren't just what they know. It's what they prefer. "It's very easy to get out of the projects, but they don't want the responsibility," Davenport says. "They have no light bill. No gas bill. $25 a month rent. They'll survive murders and killings, but they can't survive the rent running out, the phone and lights cut off."

Flood Come And Gone

When we return to Hamburg Street, a group from an Arizona church has arrived to begin work repairing St. John's roof. They are spirited and upbeat even though they're staying 20 miles outside of New Orleans. They call each other brother and talk in spiritual metaphors. "There's nothing to worry about," one of them says to Davenport. "The flood has come and gone."

Davenport can't help but notice that every single one of the 20-member group is white. In fact, of the dozens of volunteers I see come and go from his property all week—an older couple, students, hard-core rebels with hair dyed the color of Raggedy Ann—all of them are white. "At first, we thought the big black churches would help us out," Davenport says. "But they haven't sent anybody."

One of Davenport's volunteers is a 21-year-old New Orleans native attending college at the University of Memphis. Lorie Seruntine is contrarian and idealistic but friendlier than other students I'd run into, an assemblage of youth who tended to be militantly anarchistic, somewhat joyless and leery of authority, including the media. Many were organized under the Common Ground banner, a nonprofit whose picketing members temporarily halted the city from demolishing Ninth Ward homes a week after I left.

Christmas vacation is the fourth time Seruntine has returned to New Orleans, the second time she's volunteered to gut houses. She says pre-Katrina her car became her best friend because she'd driven back and forth from Memphis at least once a month for several years. "You breathe this place when you come home," she says. "There's something in the air. The energy. There's so much history and culture behind it. My high school"—Ursuline Academy, uptown on State Street—"is older than the country. I was the 275th graduating class. The French were here way before everybody else. So history is in our blood. We can't help it."

Before the storm, Seruntine was barely aware of the St. Bernard projects. "My dad would have killed me if he'd ever caught me in this part of town," she says.

Even so, she imagines the projects' residents were similar, if not identical, to the dehydrated, desperate people begging for aid in front of the Convention Center and Superdome. "I saw on television the way they were treated," she says. "I wanted to give them all a hug."

She becomes angry when I tell her what the guy in the red SUV said about clearing the projects and keeping their residents in Houston. "I'd like to punch that guy in his face," she says. "He's a douche bag. Does he even realize?"

The St. Bernard projects have been home to Jazz great Wynton Marsalis' grandmother and former state Rep. Leonard Lucas, who ran for New Orleans mayor in 2002. Raymond Myles, New Orleans' greatest gospel singer next to Mahalia Jackson, was raised in the St. Bernard development. (Myles, in fact, sang at Jackson's funeral.) And 98-year-old jazz pianist Al Broussard spent almost his entire life here.

"You have somebody in the projects who might be illiterate," she says. "But if you want a tuba player, a trumpet player, a bass player—you take that same illiterate person, and he can be an excellent musician. That's the heart and soul of New Orleans. That's what makes the city the city."

So if New Orleans is going to come back better than ever, it has to come back exactly like it was. "What I want is for Fats Domino to be back in his home in the Ninth Ward where he was before they lifted him out on a boat."

Wet Dreams of the Reconstruction

Before I leave the city, I check with Eddie Sears one last time. I want to know how he fared alone in the projects on New Year's Eve. There were no loud gun shots outside his bedroom window, he says, but no one to help pass the time either. I ask him when he'll feel like the projects have finally returned to their former state, when he'll feel like he's back home. When he's able to sit on his porch, he says, wrench in hand, repairing his bike, watching men play checkers at the store down the block. His neighbors will be outside drinking beer and his dog will pace the yard, looking for crickets.

"Little children might be playing," he says. "One might peep around the corner and call you a motherfucker and run away."

He tells me about an erotic dream he had last night of a beautiful woman who French-kissed him, reawakening his dormant sexuality. "I like tongue kissing," he says. Just as the dream was beginning to sizzle, he awoke with an erection, which he took as a good sign—not just about himself, but about the rebuilding of his hometown.

"It was a very beautiful dream," he says. "From the fantasy side, things are looking up. But we have a lot more to do."