

Desolation Row

A former Metro staffer returns home to New Orleans and finds chaos in the city's housing projects

By **W. Dean Hinton**

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WHEN Eddie Sears rolled off the couch from a nap and put his legs into thigh-deep water not long after Hurricane Katrina had passed through New Orleans, he knew the time had come to seriously consider leaving his apartment in the St. Bernard projects. By then, the electricity was out, the toilets had backed up, food was running short and a tidal surge of nasty, brackish water was slamming garbage cans into the side of his apartment.

The boatsmen arriving at Sears' front stoop called for women and children first, but the 58-year-old man hopped aboard anyway.

"It wasn't the time for that hero shit," he recalled recently.

The boat, which had no motor, had to be towed to an I-10 overpass, where Sears was transferred to a helicopter taking him to buses that eventually delivered him to the Houston Astrodome, where, Sears says, he was treated like royalty for six weeks. "If you wanted a donut, they gave you a whole box," he says. "I wanted to walk around the outside of the Astrodome with a huge 'thank you' sign."

Sears is tall and thin, with perpetually red eyes and an admitted substance abuse problem. During the week between Christmas and New Year's, he didn't seem capable of holding himself to the four-beer limit he professed to adhere to. His voice is deep, like a preacher's, but he enunciates at the front of his mouth. It often seemed as if he was yelling at me when he said he didn't mean to.

Before the storm, he called himself a "freelancer," meaning he cut grass and finished odd jobs for neighbors who lived in the quaint houses around the projects. In 1952, when he was 5, his family moved from public housing uptown into the St. Bernard Housing Development, built under a Roosevelt-era initiative. Sears has lived here, off and on, ever since.

He was offered a new start in Houston. But he turned down a rent-free apartment because he didn't want to live in an Hispanic neighborhood. "I didn't like Houston," he says. "It was too big. It was too far from the store. I didn't want to go on no one else's turf clowning around."

He eventually made his way to his son's home in Baton Rouge for two days, but left because his son is a minister who doesn't like smoking or beer-drinking. He moved to his daughter's house in Vacherie for two weeks. But he didn't appreciate the large number of guests coming and going or his daughter's welfare mentality. "She's always begging," Sears says. "I hate the begging."

He convinced his daughter to drive him to the corner of St. Bernard and Sere streets in New Orleans, which is where the southwest edge of the St. Bernard projects begins, expanding to become 45 acres of low-income apartment buildings that collectively have the look and feel of a concentration camp.

Sears arrived with \$17 in his pocket and no way to get out since his daughter told him she wouldn't be back.

"I have experienced hardship before," Sears says. "I glory in suffering. I've always had hardship since I come from a family of nine children. That's a lot of people in one motherfucking house."

Sears that found the projects, like most of New Orleans, was uninhabitable. Debris was strewn as far as the eye could see, turning the region into one giant garbage dump. St. Bernard, once home to 75,000 people, was a ghost town. The only noise was the constant beep of fire alarms in need of batteries.

Sears estimates he is the first resident back to St. Bernard, though he has met several people who have returned without permission to live in the massive complex. He found the door of his Senate Street apartment still open from rescuers looking for bodies and began squatting inside even though an 8pm curfew was in effect in that part of the city. Candles provide nightlight. Charcoal keeps him warm. He reads the Bible and says the Lord's Prayer each night before turning in.

Sears immediately found jobs gutting houses for early-returners to the Gentilly neighborhood. He made \$50 working five hours for a carpenter repairing a mom-and-pop market whose roof had collapsed during the storm. That's where I first meet Eddie Sears, outside the store sitting on a plastic bucket smoking a cigarette the day after Christmas. He is wearing a donated yellow windbreaker and brown camouflage pants. He hasn't bathed in five days.

His main concern is whether the New Orleans public housing authority, which is still exiled in Houston, will reopen the projects to residents. He's certain the jails and hospitals will have to be fully serviceable first since there's such a close connection between the projects and the legal and medical communities. Houston's crime rate, dailies in several major cities have reported, has spiked since New Orleans residents arrived post-Katrina.

There have been murmurs, especially among the white middle-class residents in Jefferson Parish, of rebuilding a new New Orleans, one where poor blacks aren't as visible. They have not-so-

secret hopes that many people like Eddie Sears will stay in Houston, Atlanta and other places where they won't be as visible to the rest of the Crescent City's social fabric.

Sears is worried the housing authority will allow the projects to sit empty while rainwater creeps through leaks in the roof, causing further damage that will take months, if not years, to repair, delaying his neighbors from returning.

He's not as sure what his private role will be to clean up his neighborhood. He contemplates whether to escape New Orleans and the depressing prospects of reconstruction. Maybe he'll find a ride to Shreveport to find work on the racetrack, where he'd once been a hotwalker and groom. He argues with himself how much he wants to work inside fungus-filled houses when homeowners don't even want to go inside. He complains he can feel mold "eating" on his neck. His nose and chest, he says, are itchy. "Why should I go into the mold if they don't want to," Sears asks while on the way to buy beer at one of the few open stores in the area. "I love me too."

He also likes the idea of finding a female companion to make recovery more bearable. After we pass a full-bodied woman pushing a baby carriage outside a FEMA office on Loyola Avenue, Sears says, "That's a woman there. I'd like to make a play on that. That's survival. That's recovery—laying up in a bed and having a woman care about you."

But it is apparent, after a week with Eddie Sears, that he isn't going anywhere. He is at home in the projects, where he knows everybody and everybody knows him. He can find his way around without a car and knows where to go to satisfy his "little vices."

The day after I meet him, he asks me to drop him off at the corner of St. Bernard and Claiborne Avenue, where he will troll some side streets until he finds someone to sell him a rock of crack. He tells me not to follow him and he doesn't want me to print that he was looking for drugs.

"Leave that part out," he says more than once. "You're fucking with the underworld. Addiction is its own punishment. There's nothing you can do about it. Your story is about the recovery. Your story is about public officials and the government doing its portion. Your story is about the humanity."

Next week: Part two. Dean Hinton is the former news editor of Metro, who now writes for the Nashville Scene.