

The 'New Orleans Stare': Mental Health Needs of Blacks Acute After Katrina

News Feature

By Kevin Weston, Pacific News Service,

The shock and anger of survivors of Hurricane Katrina has yet to be adequately addressed. Black evacuees in particular have unique needs, experiences and methods of dealing with trauma and loss that may elude mainstream mental health professionals.

BATON ROUGE, La.-- Sep. 15, 2005 -- The New Orleans Stare. You can see it in the faces of Katrina survivors here at the evacuation shelter at the River Center in Baton Rouge.

A woman looks blankly at nothing -- rubbing her face and short graying afro with wrinkled brown hands, sitting on a lonely chair outside the complex. Old men sit on the curb smoking cigarettes and talking quietly to one another. Young men try to occupy themselves by talking with relief workers and National Guardsmen with M-16s. The stare -- the facial manifestation of overwhelming loss -- is in all of the evacuees' eyes.

About 2,000 people call the River Center home. The vast majority is African American. Though their immediate physical needs are being met, the mental health issues black people are dealing with are off the radar screen in the debate surrounding the recovery of the Gulf Coast region.

Dr. Rasheda Perine, 32, a New Orleans native, is an assistant professor of psychology at Southern University in Baton Rouge and a practicing clinical psychologist. Her immediate family and a family friend are staying with her, all evacuees from New Orleans. The East New Orleans neighborhood where she grew up has been completely destroyed.

Baton Rouge has added 260,000 new residents in the last 14 days, making it the fastest-growing city in America. Most of the newcomers are from New Orleans.

Dr. Perine knows that seeking help through therapy is an issue for black people.

"There is a lot of stigma in the black community about therapy," Perine says. "You are supposed to deal with your own problems. We are like super-people -- we're not supposed to cry."

She says African Americans suffer "a lot of self-hatred because we won't express ourselves," and thinks that most Katrina victims will face Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"When you go through something very traumatic, you re-live it over and over again," Perine says. "You have nightmares, a lot of anxiety. You can't function as you normally would for months and sometimes years."

Dr. Perine herself has the look. As she talks, the tears are just beneath the surface of her face, like river water behind a levee about to burst.

"I don't think I have actually cried about it yet," she says, "I think it is going to happen soon but I have to be strong for my family."

She has, however, taken the time to process what the destruction of New Orleans means for American society, especially black people.

"I think racism is so much a part of our culture that it is covert. I don't think that President Bush outright dislikes black people, but it is so much a part of our culture that when you see a black face you don't feel as much sympathy or empathy as you do a white face. If there were cameras showing the white faces, the evacuation would have been quicker."

Lenard Rochon, 32, is from the lower ninth ward in New Orleans. He got his rap name, Venom, by "doing sneaky things and living a sneaky life and learning the hard way, basically." He's lived at the River City shelter with 24 members of his family since August 28, the day before the storm.

"It's stressful, it's hard, because I know I lost a lot of people down there in the ninth ward," says Rochon, who hasn't accessed any mental health services at the shelter. He deals with the stress by writing rhymes.

"I don't express my problems and my feelings by telling them to people," Rochon says. "Most of the time I express them by rappin' and thinking. I talk to my wife sometimes, but that's about it."

Rochon wrote the following rap in the shelter, and as he busts it one of his young family members comes over. The child, no more than 5, knows the chorus and does the background vocals.

"So where you at, Mr. President / You know we need help leaving us up in a situation by ourselves / Take a look all around you man see there's nothing left / Except for problems in the streets no food up on the shelf / And the water is contaminated you can see that man / But they steady tellin' lies I can't believe that man."

(Rochon sings the chorus softly with his young hype man)

"So lord wont you help me / I think I'm going crazy / Many of my people died / But most of them they really loved / If you look up in my eyes / I tell you this is for my people that find our passion see / They telling all these lies but if you sending help / Then tell your people come and rescue me / So won't you help me lawd."

"The 9/11 people didn't have to wait," Rochon says. The tsunami people didn't have to wait. The people in Florida with the hurricanes didn't have to wait. Why I gotta wait?"

According to Dr. Perine, the black poor in New Orleans "already had issues of anger, feelings like life has no meaning, that (they) could care less about things -- then this thing happens, and they feel like the nation does not care while we are basically drowning or sitting in the hot sun."

Ahmad Ellis, 17, is a dark chocolate-brown long and skinny youngster from the downtown area of New Orleans. Baby dreads jut out from all over his head, on top of a 6-foot frame. He is bouncing a ball inside the shelter, watching his homies play video games. Hundreds of people are resting and talking to one another -- cots, tents and blankets line the walls and floor. The stare is everywhere.

Ellis is having trouble sleeping. The flooded river city is never far from his mind. "I been thinking about New Orleans, how it's gone," he says. "I just don't talk about it. I just, I be -- I can't take it no more. Can't sleep right. I been having dreams about it. Bad weird dreams. I thought I was dead. The last dream I had, I was drowning and the rescue workers came and rescued me. I feel weird, it be hot but I'm waking up in cold sweats.

"I have to deal with it. I don't know what's gonna happen. I don't feel safe talking to anybody," Ellis says.

Dr. Perine says that for blacks in the South, the pastor or priest, not the therapist, is where people go to talk.

"One of the things I tell people is, 'Maybe God brought the therapist here to help alongside your pastor.' And then I ask, 'Can you tell your pastor everything without being judged? You are supposed to be able to tell your therapist everything without judgment. If you feel that way about your pastor, that's fine as long as you are talking to someone.'"

Stacie Condley Barthelemy, 29, is a statuesquely beautiful dark brown woman with a big smile and a quick tongue. She escaped from New Orleans just before the storm. She has been in and out of the shelter, where 12 of her immediate and extended family reside. Katrina destroyed her day-care business and her home.

Barthelemy has talked to the many preachers who come to the shelter to counsel evacuees.

"I have been leaning on faith all the way, because you can't depend on these people to help you. You call FEMA, and you can only get so much money per household. And when you apply you still don't get it. It can take a toll on you."

Of the hundreds of therapists in the Baton Rouge area, only a handful -- about 40, according to the Association of Black Psychologists -- are African American. Dr. Perine has advice for her white colleagues who may counsel some of the evacuees.

"Black people might want to get their feelings of anger out that they got left behind. If you can express empathy I think that is the most important piece. You may see someone who talks about how they feel racism had an impact. It would hurt that person if a therapist tries to get away from that conversation.

"You have to be willing to listen and not let your own biases get in the way," Perine says.