

ADVANCING HUMANITY IN NEW ORLEANS

Learning Community

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FROM OUR LEARNING COMMUNITY STUDIES AND BEYOND: THE CONTEXT OF THE MCMASTER NEW ORLEANS PROJECTS

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New Orleans presented a unique opportunity and a unique challenge to McMaster Fellows and Scholars. The opportunity was to conduct meaningful research/service projects that can make a difference in people's lives right here in the United States. To better serve our partners in New Orleans, the McMaster New Orleans Learning Community committed itself to understanding the rich cultural heritage of one of this nation's most diverse cities within the context of the realities of the 2005 hurricane season. Absorbing the big picture of what happened before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in late 2005 was a major challenge for our learning community.

Part of the complexity of the storm is that there were both natural and human factors in the extent of the damage. According to Ivor van Heerden (2006) of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center, Katrina sported the winds of a weak category three hurricane when it made landfall. Nonetheless, the power of the storm surge had already developed farther out in the gulf when, at one point, its strength was rated at category five (pp. 82, 85). That rating helps explain the “natural” part of the damage.

The human-made part of the damage has several elements. Wetlands protecting the Gulf Coast of Louisiana from storms disappeared at the rate of 25 to 40 square miles each year between 1938 and 1998 (Louisiana, 1999, p. 1). Much, possibly most, of this depletion is due to human causes. Addressing the issues involved in wetland repair will be the focus of at least one future McMaster project.

Additionally, the levees that protect the city of New Orleans were breached, with sections collapsing or washing out in more than 50 places, revealing significant design and construction problems (Associated Press, 2008). There were at least seven particularly catastrophic levee failures (Tulane, 2007). If the levees had not catastrophically failed, the flooding would have been far less and the water would have been pumped out of the city quickly. Jeb Horne (2006) reports that many people in New Orleans, including people at the Emergency Operations Center, thought they had averted disaster as they watched the waters recede and the streets dry up in the hours immediately after the storm passed, only to hear news about the big levee breaks and see the waters start rising again uncontrollably (p. 61).

Why did the levees fail in so many places? Most of them were undermined prior to their collapse rather than over-topped. In many cases, flood walls were built to a depth of only 17 feet while the adjacent canals were 19 to 35 feet deep. The storm-surge pressures of high water moving fast in these canals during the storm caused the soil underneath the levees to give way (Van Heerden, 2006, pp. 84, 85). Subsequent investigations also revealed that substandard soil had been used in the construction of some of the levees, particularly portions of the levees protecting the 17th Street Canal, the Industrial Canal, and areas between the northeastern edge of the Lower Ninth Ward and the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (Van Heerden, 2006, pp. 85, 231-237, 241).

From New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River flows for 116 meandering miles. A canal called the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) creates a straight bypass that shortens the distance and time for commercial ships to travel from the River to the Gulf. Begun in 1956 and completed in

1965, the canal was originally 650 feet wide, 35 feet deep, and very straight. MRGO now averages 1500 feet wide due largely to wetlands soil erosion after salt water incursion up the canal killed off adjacent trees and other fresh-water vegetation.

During Hurricane Katrina, the levees on the city side of MRGO became the southeastern wall of a funnel that channeled the storm surge into New Orleans. The levees along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway provided the northern wall of the funnel (Van Heerden, 2006, pp. 79-82). (See Figure 1). What happens when any fluid is forced into a funnel? The compressing action of the funnel makes the fluid move very fast. As a heavy fluid-like water reaches the neck of a flat funnel, it also rises to become much deeper.

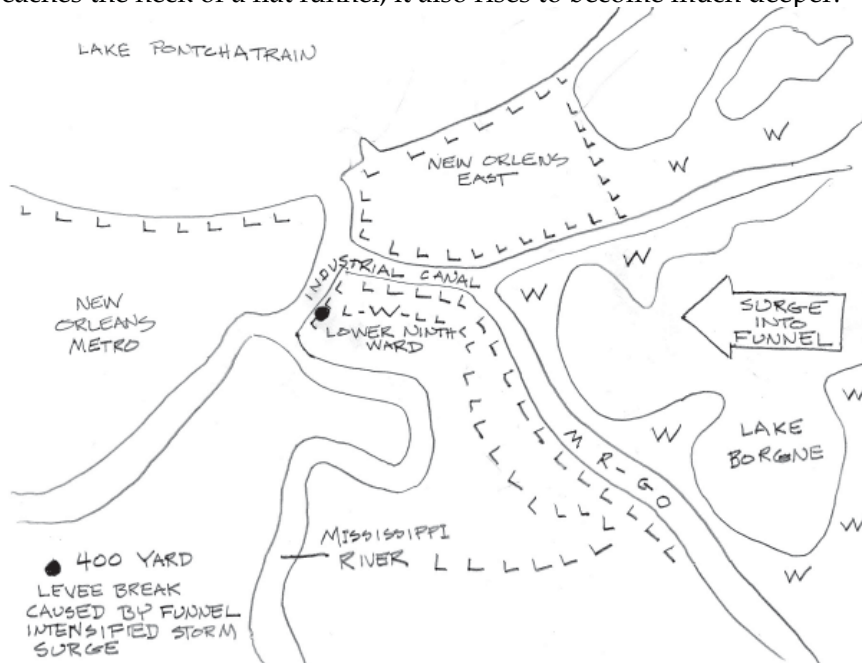


Figure 1. Sketch based upon van Heerden (2006, pp.79-83).
Douglas Fiely, artist.

Besides the compression, speed and rising action, as the water flowed through the “MRGO” funnel and into the New Orleans canal system, it had to make a sharp T bend at the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, which runs north and south between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. Water moving at high speed doesn’t T gracefully. As Figure 1 illustrates, it is near this location that a 400 yard section of the levee protecting the eastern edge of the Lower Ninth Ward washed out, allowing an 18-foot, highly-intensified storm surge to roll in, removing nearly everything in its path. The



Rev. Donald Boutte with Dr. Kenneth Christiansen

fact that the locks to the Mississippi River were closed no doubt intensified the surge even more. The surge also caused an additional major levee failure on the other side of the Industrial Canal, allowing water to pour into the New Orleans Metro bowl (Van Heerden, 2006, pp. 83–84).

Such were some of the key facts that the Learning Community studied about the conditions leading to the devastation triggered by Katrina. We became aware of just how important it was to understand the complexities of the human failure to protect New Orleans and its surrounding wetlands, for serving our community partners was not just a matter of designing socially useful projects. Serving community partners in the face of such human tragedy would necessitate a deep sensitivity to the complex physical and economic realities involved.

Equally important was the need to understand the rich cultural traditions of New Orleans. In the course of preparing for our in-city work, the Learning Community came to appreciate the unique blend of social diversity that New Orleans has developed in its long history. The early Native American and French influences have combined with African American and English traditions, resulting in obviously eclectic architecture, music, food, and social festivals. New Orleans feels like a place where the various cultural groups have developed a set of culturally responsive values that emphasize the power of mutual support within and across diverse neighborhoods.

This idea of a socially diverse city that values community helped guide the New Orleans Learning Community as we concentrated on meeting the needs of our partners in flexible, responsive ways. The projects of McMaster Fellows, Associate Fellows, and Scholars were developed with sensitivity toward the needs, values, and lifestyles of community partners. For example, one of the Associate Fellows immersed herself in the issue of wetlands restoration for the benefit of possible McMaster School projects in the future. Her research on the topic was extensive, but she didn't stop at research. She was also willing to "walk a mile in someone else's shoes." In this case, paddling a mile would be more appropriate. During the December 2007 trip to New Orleans she eagerly traveled by canoe through a bayou in order to get a sense of the enormity of the devastation to the area.

Another example of a project that included an organically responsive element was the Amistad project. Three of the Learning Community members worked in conjunction with the Amistad Research Center of New Orleans to process a collection of materials that the center had preserved but had not the human resources to organize in an accessible manner. The processing of part of the Albert W. Dent family collection took place during the trip to New Orleans, but the development of the processing protocol took place through the fall semester in partnership with the research center.

The success of the McMaster projects was due in part to the cultural responsiveness of the Learning Community. Because New Orleans was a



Dr. Mary Catherine Harper and Tron Moeller

new site for McMaster research/service projects in 2007, flexibility of method and responsiveness to opportunity were especially important. For example, one of the projects with Churches Supporting Churches, a consortium of pastors, involved interviewing several pastors about the challenges of organizing neighborhood-restoration projects. The pastors explained the process of transforming themselves from spiritual guides to community organizers, and the interview materials were later used to garner support for the pastors' projects, as was planned. But as the interviews unfolded, two unexpected opportunities presented themselves. First, several pastors expressed a desire to enhance the Churches Supporting Churches internet materials with language that would resonate with potential donors and project supporters in the Midwest, but they did not have the technical writing ability. One of the Associate Fellows took up the task of writing the needed materials during subsequent months.

The second opportunity involved a pastor not of the Churches Supporting Churches consortium, Rev. Jarone J. Dabon of Faith Temple Church of God. After Learning Community members introduced themselves to Rev. Dabon and explained their several projects, he asked if it would be possible for his church to have a website to highlight its community-focused initiatives. One of the Scholars immediately took up the challenge of providing a website to meet the pastor's needs.

Such responsiveness was due, in part, to the Learning Community's semester-long research on the values, needs, and traditions of our New Orleans partners. Perhaps it was also due to the challenge that we faced from the outset: to find meaningful, sensitive ways of helping people who have survived great danger, who have experienced inexpressible tragedy in a community so valuable to them that they can call no other place "home."

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