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# Five years later, a richer, whiter New Orleans

**Statistically, New Orleans is experiencing something of a boom. But don't be fooled about the reason why**

BY MATT DAVIS



AP

Diners enjoy lunch in the main dining room at Commander's Palace in the Garden District of New Orleans.

Still reeling in the wake of the BP oil disaster, New Orleans is approaching the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina on Sunday. The city has replaced almost all its levees, moved and upgraded pumping stations, written new evacuation plans for the most vulnerable residents, and is now well prepared to withstand another 100-year storm like the one that hit five years ago.

New Orleans now hosts 354,850 residents, almost 78 percent of its pre-Katrina population. At the same time, the city has become significantly whiter since the storm: It is now only 60 percent black, compared to 67 percent black, pre-Katrina. And many of the poorer black people who left town after the storm have yet to return.

New Orleans has gone through a boom while other cities have suffered during the recent recession. The number of poor people living in Orleans Parish has halved to 68,000 over the last five years, with

median household incomes rising to \$47,585 -- just as household incomes declined nationally over the same period. There is a healthier share of middle-class families in downtown New Orleans.

But these statistics are largely a result of poor people leaving the city after Katrina and not returning. And there's a growing divide in the greater New Orleans area between those who have benefited from the city's recovery and those who haven't. For example, there are now 93,000 people living in poverty in the six surrounding parishes around New Orleans, and there is a growing disparity in income in the greater New Orleans area, with African-Americans earning 44 percent less, and Latinos earning 25 percent less, than whites.

Does New Orleans' newfound livability for young white families come at the expense of the poor black families who made the city their home before the storm?

"By most measures, it's quite clear that the 100,000 people who are missing are the poorest and darkest former residents of the city," says Rachel Luft, professor of sociology at the University of New Orleans. "And they are being replaced by a slew of YURPs, or young urban redevelopment professionals, who tend to be whiter, wealthier and better educated than the traditional residents of New Orleans. I think they're being held up as the great white hope for rebuilding the city."

The YURPs aren't necessarily unwanted, and many traditional New Orleans residents are very grateful for their help -- but their arrival, en masse, since Katrina has brought up some uncomfortable questions for the city, which is still struggling to set goals for its long-term recovery after Katrina. Especially with the demolition of federal housing projects, which once housed many of the city's poorer African-American residents.

In the racist words of Davis McAlary's Uptown mother in the HBO show "Treme," many Uptown residents felt that a certain

"element" had been excised from the city after Katrina. Whether the result of a deliberate conspiracy or simply inept efforts by federal, state and local government to counteract prevailing socioeconomic forces, the result is that certain other "elements" are now coming to dominate New Orleans' political, cultural and social life.

Michael Ripski and Morgan Carter bought a double shotgun house on the border of New Orleans' Irish Channel and Uptown neighborhoods for just over \$300,000 in April 2010. The house, which was originally two houses, was built in 1902 and renovated into a single home in the last few years. It's spacious and immaculate inside and out, with fresh paint on every surface and a vintage charm that might fetch millions in other real estate markets like Brooklyn, N.Y., or San Francisco.

Ripski, a Brown University graduate, first came to New Orleans in 2002 to work for Teach for America, then left for graduate school just before Katrina and returned in May 2009. A psychologist, he is now the director of school support for the Achievement Network, a nonprofit founded in Boston in 2005. Carter moved to New Orleans in summer 2007 after finishing a master's degree in education policy at Stanford University.

"Professionally, this is most interesting place I could be," says Carter. "And it's the most fun place, and it's a fun place to put down roots."

Morgan and Carter also value the ethnic and socioeconomic variety in their neighborhood, and point out that their presence in the area has been positive.

"This house, actually, from what we've been told, was the neighborhood crack house 10 years ago," says Carter. "It burned down, and they took it down to the foundation and rebuilt it with new electricity and plumbing."

Both Carter and Ripski are originally from the South, he from Virginia, and she from Texas, and they refute the suggestion that they might be modern-day New Orleans "carpetbaggers." The term was given to Northerners by Southerners during the post-Civil War Reconstruction era between 1865 and 1877, suggesting opportunism and exploitation in the outsiders.

"I didn't come here to do well professionally," says Ripski. "I came here to help the children who were being done a disservice by a dysfunctional education system."

"My interest has always been providing for the educational needs of all children," says Carter. "And in New Orleans, there is a greater opportunity to effect change."

Indeed, Katrina was the catalyst for reforming a failing public school system. Before Katrina, there was only one charter school in the city compared to the Orleans Parish School Board's 120 public schools. Now there are 51 charter schools across the city, and only 37 traditional schools -- with children doing better, academically. Most attribute the shift to a weakening of resistance to the charter school movement from unions, teachers, parents and certain legislators, after Katrina.

It's one thing for New Orleans to attract a booming YURP population, but it's another to try to keep such people once they arrive. Many young people have come to New Orleans for Teach for America, for example, and then left for graduate school or professional opportunities in cities like New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Indeed, Nathan Rothstein, the co-founder and executive director of the now defunct nonprofit NolaYURP (former slogan: Connect. Retain. Attract), has since moved back to Massachusetts to go to graduate school for an MBA in nonprofit management. A year ago the nonprofit was holding benefits and fundraisers. Now its Facebook page and blog have gone without updates since early 2009.

"I moved this summer; I'm starting grad school," says Rothstein. "I made a strong connection to the city, so I may be back. I don't think people going to school and moving away for a year or two or five years, and then returning, is necessarily a bad thing. I understand how it looks, but I felt it was the right time for me to go to school."

Rothstein says he feels good about how people he met in New Orleans have made connections and are now networking in New Orleans and around the country.

"As a 23-year-old starting the organization, I did it without any experience, but then to continue doing that kind of work I felt that this kind of degree would be right for me," he says. "No school in New Orleans really focuses on nonprofit management."

Rothstein also says that while New Orleans failed to "connect, retain and attract" him, personally, "the important thing is that people who would have never been exposed to New Orleans spent time there and are now ambassadors for the city, wherever they go."

After Katrina, former real estate agent Leslie Jacobs founded 504Ward, a nonprofit named after the city's phone prefix, to try to stop the "brain drain" she saw in New Orleans. 504Ward produces a newsletter and puts on regular restaurant nights and gatherings for its majority white membership.

"My daughter went away to school, and in my mind is very typical of the brain drain that has hit New Orleans for years," says Jacobs. "But many of her friends came back and wanted to be part of rebuilding. One of them said that rebuilding New Orleans, in essence, is their generation's Woodstock."

But is post-Katrina New Orleans, like Woodstock, somewhere for upwardly mobile people in their early 20s to come for a dose of gritty authenticity, before moving on to responsible, child-rearing lives elsewhere?

Marla Nelson and Renia Ehrenfeucht are urban planning professors at the University of New Orleans who have interviewed 78 YURPs since Hurricane Katrina as part of a research project into the city's attracting the so-called creative class, and they are concerned about overblown Woodstock-era rhetoric. Indeed, they see an internal tension in many of those who say they're moving to the city for altruistic reasons.

"Some of the people we interviewed see this as the civil rights struggle of their generation, but there is, I think, a little uneasiness to say that this is something we should celebrate," says Nelson.

"Our interviewees talk about New Orleans being such a great place, but then when they talk about their work there's a sense that historically the city has been very lazy," Ehrenfeucht says. "There's a real sense that not everyone in New Orleans is professionally competent."

Ehrenfeucht points especially to the charter school movement: The influx of young white teachers willing to work long hours without a union contract led to the displacement of many older black teachers who had been in the public school system for a generation.

"There's also this real reluctance to see this as part of gentrification," she continues. "On the one hand they'll say, 'I'm moving to this great neighborhood,' but they're not willing to see that they're part of what makes the neighborhood not so great anymore, and there's also this feeling that 'I'm in a great place, but that, hey, I'm the only one who wants to do any real work around here.'"

Meanwhile, the city continues to struggle with the highest per capita murder rate in the nation, overwhelmingly among young African-American men in the poorer areas. And eastern New Orleans is still at least two years away from serving its 90,000 residents with an emergency room: Patients who would otherwise survive are dying in long ambulance rides downtown.

"We are no longer rebuilding. We are now creating. Let's stop thinking about rebuilding the city we were and start dreaming

about the city we want to become," the city's new mayor, Mitch Landrieu, said in May. "The world deserves a better New Orleans."

To his credit Landrieu, the first white mayor since his father, Moon Landrieu, left office in 1978, has not shied away from raising race as an issue to be tackled in the "re-creation" of New Orleans. Facing a \$67 million hole in the city's budget following the departure of former Mayor Ray Nagin, Landrieu told residents of poorer eastern New Orleans and the Ninth Ward last month that repossession of vacant properties in their districts is crucial to the city's economic recovery.

"I want to talk about race," Landrieu told attendees at a recent neighborhood meeting. "You start taking people's homes, people start asking, 'Why you trying to stop people coming home, Mr. Mitch, looking the way you do' -- do I need to say it?"

The crowd murmured support.

"The question is: Is this about race? Or is it about the city?" he said. "And when is the day when we start focusing on these properties? Is it now? Is it September? Is it November? Or yesterday?"

The crowd cheered when Landrieu said "yesterday."

"I'm just asking, I just want to make sure I heard you," the mayor continued. "Because I promise you as soon as I lay it down, somebody's going to lay it down, and there's going to be a march."

"We got your back, Mitch," shouted several people in the crowd.

Meanwhile, Brad Pitt's charity, the Make It Right foundation, has acquired the nickname the "Make It White" foundation, and has drawn quiet criticism for foisting \$350,000 Frank Gehry-designed houses on poor black property owners in the Lower Ninth Ward, who may well, at some point, see an incentive to sell out and realize the nonprofit's equity in their homes.

Make It Right has raised \$31 million in donations and so far, and it has built just 50 homes of a targeted 150 homes since building started in 2008. The organization employs 33 staff. By comparison, other nonprofits like Build Now will have built 38 houses for just \$162,000 each, including all overhead. Lowernine.org helped to rebuild more than 50 houses for Lower Ninth Ward residents between 2008 and 2009 with a budget of just over \$1 million a year.

"Anyone who is worried about Lower Ninth Ward families reselling their Make It Right homes and moving out of the area needs to spend more time talking to the homeowners," says Make It Right communications director Taylor Royle. "These are families who lost everything in this neighborhood and still worked hard -- and many are still working hard -- to come home.

"This is the place where their great-grandmothers and grandfathers lived and where they grew up and knew their neighbors," Royle continues. "Some of those neighbors are back and living next door again. Lower Ninth Ward homeowners will tell you that this is where they want to be and anywhere else is not the same for them."

"People get in their shit, and at some levels it has to do with professional jealousy," says Laura Paul, the Canadian, cowboy boot-wearing development director of Lowernine.org, about Make It Right. "But they've brought a ton of attention to the neighborhood. And Brad Pitt is really fucking handsome."

Meanwhile, Lower Ninth Ward residents have continued to express impatience about the pace at which the city has supplied services in their area.

"How come the only buses that are coming out here are looking at Brad Pitt's houses?" asked Lower Ninth Ward resident Patrick Shannon Spears, at another recent city budget hearing.

"When the tour buses come into the city to see Brad Pitt's houses, the buses come past my house and they shake it. Who's going to fix my house, now?" asked another resident, Rosa Ulmer. "And what do I do with the snakes? I had two in my yard yesterday. I have empty lots around my area, so that the snakes and the rats and the raccoons visit me on a daily basis. We have kids that want to play in the area but they can't because of the snakes and the rats and the raccoons."

Mayor Landrieu said he would at least try to do something about the snakes, the rats and the raccoons. In the first 65 days of his administration, Landrieu also brokered a deal, which had eluded his predecessor, to get a hospital reopened in eastern New Orleans.

Back on the border of New Orleans' Uptown and Irish Channel neighborhoods, Carter and Ripski insist that they have moved to the city for the long term. They will even send their children, should they have any, to New Orleans' public schools, which, presumably, if they are professionally successful, will be among the best in the nation by then.

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-- By Matt Davis