



"Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant: No matter how friendly and even-tempered the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt." So said Pierre Trudeau to Americans during a speech at the National Press Club in 1969.

The Elephant is a blog that takes Trudeau's quote to heart. What happens in Washington still creates ripples, or waves, north of the 49th parallel. The Elephant will, by virtue of upcoming events, focus heavily on presidential politics as Americans prepare for the 2008 election, but it will also be a place where readers can get their fix of Americana.

The Elephant's Top 10 of 2007 - #8 New Orleans, Two years later

It was easy finding Gertrude Leblanc's house in the Lower Ninth Ward. The 71-year-old grandmother's home, a FEMA trailer actually, was one of only two on the entire stretch of Tennessee street between Claiborne and Florida Avenues. Leblanc was sitting inside on a humid August afternoon, flipping through the pages of a photo album that showed her community the way it was before Hurricane Katrina. Full of neighbours with tidy, shotgun-style houses tucked beneath mature trees that provided shade from the summer heat. They were images of a once-vibrant neighbourhood that most of America, unfortunately, knows only in its post-apocalyptic form.

Long since retired from the U.S. post office, Leblanc is now an urban pioneer in the rawest sense of the term. She is almost alone in the Lower Ninth Ward, two years after a barge rammed into the Industrial Canal burst only blocks away, inundating the area with five metres of water. The nearest grocery store for Leblanc is miles away. The only traffic on her block comes in the form of giant dump trucks carrying away the rubble of homes once owned by friends. Even now, two years later.

Having reported from New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit the city on Aug. 29, 2005, the most striking thing I've noticed on returning - three times now since the storm - is just how empty the Lower Ninth Ward remains to this day. There are still boats lying in streets outside of empty houses.



Most of the wreckage of homes washed away in the floods has been removed, and now there are only empty lots choked with weeds. And a few lonely people like Leblanc. A few blocks away, Keith Craft was living in a formaldehyde-infested FEMA trailer while he painstakingly rebuilt his home on the north side of Claiborne Avenue, the absolute worst-hit area of the city.

On the second anniversary of the storm, President George W. Bush visited a charter school across the street from Craft's house. If the president had strayed from his pre-assigned photo op, he would have heard a tale of heartbreak and health problems that is common among returning New Orleanians.

The sad fact of New Orleans is that the city has been all but forgotten only two years after the worst natural disaster in the nation's history. The American media, which closely covered the city's woes for the first year after the storm, all but ignores the Big Easy now. And it is not because things are going well. New Orleans is nowhere near recovery, and the Lower Ninth Ward in particular is a blight that only the most diehard residents are trying to save. It shames political leaders at every level of government.

Even now, many of the street signs in the Lower Ninth are hand-painted:



A plea from one of the only residents on Tennessee Street:

Robert Lynn Green, Sr.
(SON) 201-8860

E-MAIL: GRROB1207@aol.com

Joyce Hilda Green - U.S. CITIZEN

11/09/31 TO 08/29/05 100 PM

U.S. AIR FORCE (25 YEARS 8/14/78)

SHANAI "NAB NAB" GREEN

04/11/02 TO 08/29/05 400 AM

WE WANT OUR COUNTRY
TO LOVE US

AS MUCH AS WE
LOVE OUR COUNTRY

THE STRENGTH OF
OUR COUNTRY
BELONGS TO US

MR. BUSH:
REBUILD-





Signs from the only businesses booming in the neighbourhood:



Irony lives in the Lower Ninth:



The Goin' Home community cafe was the only place, as of last August, where Lower Ninth Ward residents could come for a warm meal and a place to rest during long days of rebuilding.



The sign outside the cafe, which is run by a non-profit group:



Here's a photo of Gertrude Leblanc standing the steps of a neighbour's home, all that remains even now. In the background is her own trailer home.



What's left of another home on her block:



And here's the article I wrote on Gertrude, part of a series on the second anniversary:

NEW ORLEANS - Before the flood waters came and turned the Lower Ninth Ward into a giant mixing bowl, Gertrude Leblanc loved nothing better than to sit on the front porch of her home on summer evenings and chat with her neighbours.

The 71-year-old grandmother has no neighbours now, and no house for that matter, so Leblanc has had to find a new way to relax and forget her daily troubles.

"I sit outside with my Bible every morning and pray. It's quiet, and it's peaceful," she says. "I wish I had some neighbours, but with God you are never alone."

It's a sentiment expressed often among the few hardy residents who have returned to this devastated community two years after Hurricane Katrina roared through the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005.

While other hard-hit areas of New Orleans have largely rebounded from Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward remains in an uncomfortable limbo, somewhere between revival and collapse.

You can read the rest of the story [here](#).

And here's Keith Craft, a hardy soul who relied on his faith to help him get through the trials of the last two years.



The sign says: Kingdom Builders. Contractor: Jesus Christ. Subcontractor: King James Bible.

Here's the story I wrote on Keith and the thousands of other Gulf Coast residents stuck in contaminated trailers provided them by Uncle Sam:

NEW ORLEANS -- When he finally got his FEMA trailer in June 2006, Keith Craft felt like his life was about to take a turn for the better.

A lifelong New Orleans resident whose house flooded to the ceiling following hurricane Katrina, Mr. Craft had spent 10 uncomfortable months living in cramped motels awaiting Federal Emergency Management Agency approval to place a government-issued travel trailer on his lot while he rebuilt his home.

That FEMA actually said yes to Mr. Craft seemed like a rare bit of good fortune.

Until then, the agency had deemed his neighbourhood, a 22-block stretch of the Lower Ninth abutting the crippled Industrial Canal levee, a no-go zone for human habitation.

"We were the first people to have a trailer on the north side of Claiborne Avenue," Mr. Craft said. "We were appreciative of what we got."

Turns out Mr. Craft wasn't so lucky after all. Not long after the 53-year-old hospital worker moved into his temporary living quarters, he developed a hacking cough. His 13-year-old son started wheezing, suffering from eye irritation and complaining of a sore throat.

Mr. Craft immediately suspected the trailer was to blame, but had no proof. The confirmation only came this month when FEMA acknowledged that wood panels in many of the travel trailers provided to Katrina evacuees were laced with formaldehyde, a carcinogen that can cause severe respiratory problems.

And the link to the rest of the story is [here](#).

New Orleans today is a city riddled with crime and, in places, almost absent of hope. Much of the violence today is gang-related, but there are random incidents that have created ongoing anxiety among middle-class residents. One such person was Helen Hill, a former Halifax filmmaker shot in her own home last January.

Police are still searching for the killer and her family continues to mourn.

Helen and her husband, Paul Gailiunas:



Here's the story on the ongoing investigation into Helen Hill's murder:

NEW ORLEANS - It has been almost eight months now since the early morning silence of the Marigny district was broken by the sound of gunfire from inside Helen Hill's tidy white house on North Rampart Street.

Eight long, frustrating months since the acclaimed Canadian filmmaker was killed by a bullet wound to the neck. No clues, no arrests and no closure for family members desperate for answers.

Still grieving, Hill's stepfather has come to his own painful conclusions.

The rest of the story is here.

Patricia Berryhill was a nurse who spent days caring for patients in a New Orleans hospital during the storm. She came home to find her Lower Ninth Ward home flooded with 12 feet of water. Rather than fix it up for herself, she turned the keys over to a group that established the first, and still only, health clinic now operating in the Lower Ninth. She now works there as clinical director. Here's my story on Berryhill that was published in the National Post, and a photo of her in front of the clinic.



If there is one good news story out of Hurricane Katrina, it is the tale of Canadaville, the tidy community north of Baton Rouge built by Magna executive Frank Stronach. Two years on, it is a thriving, peaceful and comfortable community where former New Orleanians are learning to farm, now branching out into organics. Despite some lingering tensions with the local mayor, the little town on the banks of the Atchafalaya River seems to be working:

SIMMESPORT, La. - It has been described as a peculiar social experiment, dismissed as a tax write-off for a wealthy Canadian businessman and even been likened -- albeit jokingly -- to a modern-day plantation.

But for Joe Bramlett, a former New Orleans shipyard worker who was evacuated by helicopter out of the Lower Ninth Ward following Hurricane Katrina, the modular home park known as Canadaville has been nothing short of a blessing.

"I don't have to worry about hearing gunshots in the night. I don't have to worry about nobody coming in my trailer. I can leave my door open and unlocked -- don't have to worry," says Mr. Bramlett. "That's what I like."

Here's the link to the full story and a pic of the development.



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