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## The Katrina crusaders

By Lauren Foster

Sharon Hanshaw was out of town when Hurricane Katrina tore through Biloxi, Mississippi in 2005, flattening houses, damaging infrastructure and washing a giant casino barge across US Highway 90.

When she returned to discover she had lost her home and the beauty salon she had owned for 21 years, she found solace among women who had begun meeting regularly to talk about life after the storm.

Last January she helped found the group Coastal Women for Change to give residents a voice in decisions about the future of their community. "There is no affordable housing, no childcare, and limited transportation," says Ms Hanshaw, CWC's executive director. "But there are casinos."

On the eve of the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, more than 200,000 people are still displaced and tens of thousands are living in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers. To make matters worse, bureaucratic ineptitude has held up billions of dollars in aid.

"It is not enough just to hold candlelight vigils on the anniversary of Katrina; women in the Gulf region are burning candles on both ends every day," says Mia White, a consultant with the Ms Foundation ([ms.foundation.org](http://ms.foundation.org)) for Katrina Women's Response Fund.

In New Orleans, which became uninhabitable immediately after Katrina overwhelmed the levees of Lake Pontchartrain, life is still a daily struggle for many.

"It was an equal opportunity disaster but it wasn't an equal opportunity recovery," says Nancy Aronson, a donor activist based in New Orleans and a member of Women Donors Network, an organisation for progressive individual donors.

Low-income women and the elderly were the hardest hit. "In times of natural disaster, those groups who are most marginalised before tragedy strikes bear the brunt of the ill-effects during the disaster and long afterwards," says Avis Jones-DeWeever, director of poverty, education and social justice programmes at the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

"Although [Katrina] threatened all, those most vulnerable to its effects were the ones with the fewest resources to draw upon when it mattered most." (see box)

When the time came to marshal resources for the recovery, however, many women took charge. "Women are the community organisers trying to pull together and make things happen when government aid falls short," says Dr Jones-DeWeever. "It is interesting that despite all the challenges they face they haven't given up."

The women of Katrina are not unique in this respect: women round the world tend to respond to natural disasters by becoming grassroots organisers, fundraisers and donors.

“Women have a long history of being extraordinarily imaginative and insightful of what people need to gain independence,” says Claire Gaudiani, chair of the graduate programme in philanthropic studies at New York University and author of *The Greater Good*, about the history of American philanthropy. “There is a long-standing tradition of women stepping up and doing the hands-on work and raising the money. The care of the individual by women is the hallmark of women’s philanthropy.”

Still, the task ahead is daunting as much of the region still lacks affordable housing, transport, schools, healthcare and childcare facilities, and job opportunities.

Chris Kromm is executive director of the Institute for Southern Studies, a non-profit research and education centre based in North Carolina, and co-editor of Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch, which monitors the recovery.

“What is striking when you visit the region is that there are great stretches from New Orleans to Biloxi where the storm could have hit yesterday, it is just miles and miles of devastation. It is shocking to see how little has changed,” he says. He says there are “fundamental barriers” preventing the recovery from going forward. “It goes to federal accountability,” he says. “About \$110bn has been allocated from the federal government for Katrina relief but the estimates are that only 20 per cent has been spent. The issue is: who keeps track? There is no office charged with oversight.”

Fed up with the failure of government, community leaders have formed grassroots organisations to advocate for change and amplify their voices. They rely for funding on philanthropy and foundations.

“The areas of greatest need are housing, education and healthcare but obviously those are areas where a relatively small amount of philanthropic dollars isn’t going to fix the problem,” says Annie Ducmanis, project manager of the Gulf Coast Fund, a special project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

“We’ve tried to be strategic by giving grants to organisations that are doing advocacy and public policy work so that those funds are made available and used in an accountable way.”

GCF ([www.rockpa.org/gulfcoastfund/](http://www.rockpa.org/gulfcoastfund/)), established in September 2005 to channel money from donors to non-profit groups involved in equitable recovery, has raised about \$2.2m and given out grants of about \$1.5m (the average size is \$10,000 to \$15,000).

At its core is a 21-member advisory group of policy advocates, community activists and organisers, most of whom are women.

“There’s a really big difference between charity and philanthropy. The traditional disaster relief is charity . . . That is a tiny drop in the ocean of needs and you won’t address the needs if you don’t empower people to be participants in the planning process. When you are dealing with need of that magnitude, traditional charity isn’t going to cut it. There just aren’t enough Band-Aids in the world,” says Ms Ducmanis.

While some big philanthropic organisations such as the Ford and Rockefeller foundations and The Twenty-First Century Foundation (21CF), are still making grants, others have gone on to other things.

“In philanthropy, people have their issue *du jour* or their focus for the year,” she says. “They did their Katrina grant and now they’ve moved on. We’re really trying to keep these stories and these people and what’s happening in the region in the sights of the funding community.”

Amelie Ratliff, a member of WDN and an active donor in the region, says the recovery must be kept on the front burner. “For what it’s worth, each of the major public policy issues of our times – immigrant rights, war in Iraq, global warming, international human rights, privatisation, social and cultural dislocation, public education – are front and centre and evidenced in the Gulf South right now,” she says.

Another important area is women's rights. Shana Griffin is a member of the national organising collective of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and interim organising and programme director of the New Orleans Women's Health and Justice Initiative. She says efforts must focus on women because they are the primary caregivers and pillars of their families and communities. "In a disaster the burden on women increases while access to the resources decreases," she says.

Resourceful, innovative partnerships are key in the rebuilding effort. "The focus of our grantmaking is on organisations that are really trying to insert the voices of residents of all income levels more fully into shaping decisions that are made," says Rev John Vaughn, programme director for 21CF, which has a long history of funding in the South.

Its grantees include CWC ([www.cwcbiloxi.org](http://www.cwcbiloxi.org)) and the Steps Coalition for South Mississippi Gulf Coast Recovery, formed in June 2006 by a group of community leaders who wanted to promote "an equitable recovery and healthy, just, and sustainable communities".

While progress has been slow on many fronts, there are stories of triumph and creativity.

Take the residents of Wayland, Massachusetts, who started Wayland to Waveland, a non-profit public/private partnership working to rebuild Waveland, Mississippi. ([www.waylandtowaveland.org](http://www.waylandtowaveland.org))

Or Carol Bebel, co-founder and director of New Orleans's Ashé Cultural Arts Center, and Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, who are collaborating on "The Katrina Monologues".

Ms Aronson, the donor activist, is helping raise money for the play, which will premier next April in New Orleans in conjunction with the 10th anniversary of V-Day, a global movement to stop violence against women and girls.

"The story of Katrina can be looked at on many levels: the failure of government, the injustices to the poor and disenfranchised but also the power and courage and resilience of women who got their families together, got out of the way of the flood, brought their families back, tore out the Sheetrock from their homes and rebuilt their churches," says Ms Aronson. "There is a lot of power in words and in telling stories. I consider this the greatest natural disaster to have befallen this country but for the most part people have moved on. This will shine the spotlight back on New Orleans."