

# After the flood

Young adults find opportunity, and frustration, in New Orleans

BY ALISON LOBRON

**TAKE ONE FLOODED** city. Add thousands of devastated inhabitants, a bungled federal response, and an absence of civic leadership. It doesn't sound like a recipe for success, yet nearly four years after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans seems to be doing one thing that remains a perennial challenge in Massachusetts: getting young adults to feel a personal stake in the region's future.

Just ask Hampton Barclay. A native of Washington, D.C., who attended boarding school in Massachusetts, Barclay moved to New Orleans in May 2006, soon after he finished college. The city was barely functional at that point, and that's exactly why Barclay wanted to go.

"Part of it was that I wanted to go down and help people," he says. "For somebody just getting out of college, this was where I could just step right in and work on issues that would really impact an American city." He compares the city to the Wild West: chaotic and disorganized, yes, but a place where a young and energetic person could compete for jobs that require 10 years of experience elsewhere. Barclay, now 26, soon landed a job as "green building director" for Home Builders' Association of Greater New Orleans.

The Millennial Generation often gets a bad rap as a bunch of kids who have been told they're special so many times that they expect to be promoted to CEO after 45 minutes in a new job. But for the young, new residents of New Orleans that I met on a recent trip there, the city's lure isn't just the chance for a fancy title. It's the chance to feel that they're doing meaningful work right after college, rather than sitting in cubicles, chatting on Facebook, and counting the seconds to lunch.

Barclay's friend Nathan Rothstein, 25, grew up in Lexington and attended the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He thinks the college-to-work transition can be tough for smart, educated young people—not because they expect to be in charge right away, but because they're accustomed to using their brains.

"When you're in college, you're doing critical thinking," said Rothstein, who has become the

political director for probable mayoral candidate James Perry, now the executive director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center. "Then you go into these jobs where you think you'll be able to do a lot and you're really idealistic, and in the end you just sit behind a desk and you're pushing papers."

Rothstein says that when he compares himself to his college friends in Boston, New York, and Washington, he feels a greater connection to his adopted city. He goes to planning meetings; he feels like he has a voice in the rebuilding process. He runs a networking group of about 3,000 young professionals in New Orleans, and, along with other local boosters, likes to talk about reversing the brain drain that plagued the Big Easy even before the hurricane.

Between the 1960s and August 2005, New Orleans bled educated young people, who would leave for college and not return. A Brookings Institution report found a net loss of college graduates in the metropolitan region during the '90s, the same period in which southern cities like Dallas and Atlanta were attracting professionals. But since Katrina, at least some indicators suggest that people moving into the city belong to the same demographic that had been moving out before the storm. GNO Inc., an economic development organization, reports that for every older professional who left New Orleans after Katrina, two 23- to 35-year-olds have moved in. And Tulane University reports that its applications are up 180 percent from their pre-Katrina levels.

**WHAT'S AS STRIKING** as the numbers are the way young people talk about the city: Rothstein and Barclay speak in plural first person, about "us" and "we," as opposed to seeing the city as a "they" and themselves as a "me." It suggests a level of buy-in that isn't found everywhere among people in those initial who-will-I-be-and-where-will-I-live years after college.

The city's youthful energy was palpable when I

visited in December 2008 as part of a service trip to repair homes and facilities still devastated by the storm. I traveled with a group of “young adult” volunteers, ages 25 to 35, and those of us over 27 felt like wizened crones compared to the young professionals living and working there.

Still, just as palpable as the energy was the sense of wheel-spinning—of duplicated efforts, services provided in the most inefficient manner possible, and lots of youthful executive directors running around without the tools or the power to implement their ideas. That’s a symptom of the much larger disarray in post-Katrina New Orleans. Some neighborhoods have been fully rebuilt; others look like a war zone. There’s significant disagreement as to whether all areas *should* be rebuilt (due to the threat of future storms, and the still-uncertain levees), but in the meantime, lots of individuals are out there with hammers and nails and little coordination of efforts.

In the Lower 9th Ward, empty building lots are interspersed with enormous, brightly colored, solar-paneled houses with funds provided by actor Brad Pitt, among others. The Broadmoor area, where I volunteered, is another eerie blend of the restored and the still-abandoned; a sparkling, pre-fabricated home will sit opposite a water-ravaged house still covered in spray-paint to indicate how many bodies were found there in September 2005. Years after the initial trauma, residents live with constant daily reminders of the havoc: the empty house across the street, the grocery store that still isn’t open, the friends who evacuated to Houston and never returned. As one suburban resident puts it, everyone in New Orleans *should* have post-traumatic stress disorder, and the only reason some don’t is that they haven’t gotten to the “post” stage yet.

Then there are all these energetic, un-traumatized young people, empowered to do anything. But they are living in a city where, they say, it’s very hard to get anything done.

“I’ve loved living here, but it’s been the most frustrating experience of my life,” says Barclay. “The leadership of the city wasn’t willing to make any hard choices about what to do.

There were no mechanisms set up either to really strongly encourage people to return, or to say, ‘No, we’re not going to rebuild here.’ It’s resulted in this sort of mishmash, where you have one or two houses on a block and you’ve got to provide city services—school, electricity, police—for that one house. And it’s a lot more expensive to deliver to that one house than to a whole block of houses.”

There was a similar lack of coordination and leadership even at my group’s volunteer level. Our group was assigned to build a fence between two restored houses and, as is often the case with unskilled volunteers, none of us knew the first thing about fence-building. So the week



This artwork by Leandro Erlich is in a neighborhood devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The piece is, fittingly, called *Too Late for Help*.

was something of a comedy of errors: nailing boards backwards, trying again, and hoping nobody got hurt playing with power tools. When the fence was finally complete, we felt the warm glow of altruism and the satisfaction of doing what was, for us, difficult work. But we also knew that having seven white-collar professionals fly to New Orleans to build a fence was not the most efficient or effective use of resources.

So I left with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was great to see young people diving in and getting involved in a city that was, by many accounts, an organizational mess even before Katrina. On the other, it was hard to

## There’s energy, but also a sense of wheel-spinning.

ignore the lack of guidance, mentorship, and forethought. The whole notion of supervision can be annoying when you’re young and think you don’t need it, but it’s pretty great when you get a mentor who both knows what she’s doing and knows how to teach you.

It made me wonder whether there’s a happy medium between a place like New Orleans, where a young person can do anything (but can’t get anything done), and a place like Massachusetts, where newcomers often say it’s hard to feel part of things in a state whose establishment is so, well, established. I hope there is—and that it doesn’t take a hurricane to find it. **CW**



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<sup>1</sup>*Boston Business Journal*, Sept. 5, 2008. CRN201011-113718