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Reading between the lines of the Gentilly Project

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I've been giving my Death and Destruction tours for a year and a half now, thinking that the more people see the scope of the devastation in New Orleans, the better they can understand our plight.

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I've given D&D tours to college roommates, the grown children of friends, visiting journalists, even one bus tour of 50-plus Kenyon College students here to gut houses.

But my first tour stands out.

Quintus Jett arrived in Louisiana in November 2005 to attend the Rights, Recovery and Renaissance summit, organized in the storm's aftermath by the state NAACP. At the time, my oldest daughter was a senior at Dartmouth College, where Jett teaches in the Tuck School of Business; after a campus gathering for Katrina victims, he ended up with my name and phone number.

Quintus Jett (I'm going to use that wonderful name in a novel someday) is young, black and has a doctorate from Stanford University. His conversation is laced with phrases like "organizational theory" and "paradigm shifts." In many ways, we couldn't be more different.

But in the important ways, we click. He has visited New Orleans a dozen times since Katrina, and recently finished a mapping project of Gentilly that indicates where people are back, where they've gutted, where homes are untouched. You may have read about it on The Times-Picayune's front page last week. It's an important tool in understanding our city's journey -- one that, for him, "has been a wild ride."

Jett had visited New Orleans before the storm, initially with mostly white fraternity brothers in 1988, and he came away with a vision of the city quite different from theirs: He saw an environment riddled with poverty and segregated heavily by race. Ironically, he arrived again in July 2005 for a convention that was canceled by the impending threat of Hurricane Dennis.

"They always veer east," his local friends told him. It did.

When Katrina hit, he had "an acute emotional reaction" to pictures in the media of desperate people gathered at the Convention Center.

"It hit me even then," he said, "that there would be plenty of people to blame. But I wanted to focus on solutions. I thought of my work in organizational theory, of how people can participate without a bureaucratic framework. I watched people get up and 'speak' for the evacuees. I'd think, 'Why can't they speak for themselves?'"

He soon found out some of the difficulties. On that first D&D tour with me, Jett saw what he described as "a city in a state of shock."

"I remember driving along I-610 and looking out both sides of the car and seeing empty houses as far as you could see, with cars still in the drives and no residents at all," he said. "I thought, 'This is huge.'"

After awhile, he said, something began to gel. "I realized that in some places -- St. Bernard, the Lower 9 -- houses were off their foundations. But in other areas, the houses were still standing. And I thought, I can count those houses. And if I can count the houses, I can measure this."

He's been measuring ever since, with the help of Dartmouth geographer Xun Shi, young researchers from Dillard University as well as other schools from across the country, university colleagues, community groups and more. They chose to map the houses of Gentilly because of its diversity and the geography of it -- "a nice footprint of areas," as Jett put it. "Early on, someone asked, 'What about the Lower 9?' I said, 'We'll get to it.'"

The concrete results of the Gentilly Project can be found online -- in all, 16,039 homes classified as vacant and gutted, abandoned or occupied. Recently, Jett shared some of the project's more intangible results.

First, he's learned that people need an emotional link with recovery in order to cope, and to participate. "They need some sense of control. They want to believe that they can have an effect on the situation."

He's learned that rebuilding has to be inclusive. "It's about collective problem-solving -- the belief that anyone at any level can give you an important piece of the puzzle."

And he's experienced first-hand the dual nature of disaster: Call it the fight-versus-flight response.

"The literature from the '60s and '70s on disaster response has two competing hypotheses: one, that the bigger the disaster, the more outpouring there will be of help. Or two, that when the catastrophe is too large, people don't pitch in because they feel too helpless," Jett said. "I've seen that competing tension in New Orleans."

While Jett acknowledges the intense love New Orleanians have for their city, he posits (I'm picking up the academic lingo) that their very devotion can be a roadblock to the recovery effort.

"New Orleanians keep emphasizing their problems to the national audience, and that those problems should be fixed because this is such a unique and special place. Instead, they should be emphasizing that building can and is being done. If we show the progress, we can entice help."

People don't need to love New Orleans in order to come and fix it."

Whether New Orleans will be "fixed" remains to be seen, said Jett, who describes himself as neither optimist nor pessimist, but realist.

"Phase one is over -- the gutting, the debris removal," he said. "We're in phase two now, a time for skilled labor, training and rebuilding. And there are several obstacles."

First, he said, we need to confront the failure of bureaucracy to deal with disaster.

Second, we need to address the fact that government resources are insufficient to heal all wounds. "We need innovative ways to mobilize resources."

Finally, we need to change the local narrative from destruction to recovery.

"Everyone goes to the Lower 9 to see the damage, but they don't go over to Holy Cross to see the rebuilding there," Jett said. "The way we're thinking about this needs a paradigm shift. There's too much focus on process -- on getting everything planned before you begin -- and not enough on destination, or where we need to go."

Basically, what he's saying is that if you're stranded on a desert island, you build a hut. You don't sit back and plan a mansion for the future.

Neighborhoods, Jett believes, will come back according to the physical and social geography of the particular area. "People talk about what happens when only one house on the block comes back, but that's not the norm. And clustering? The city already is clustered. We need to look at the concrete and not the conceptual."

That is, people will rebuild where density and geography dictate.

"Beacon (of Hope Resource Center) is cool because it takes an individual problem and makes it a group problem. We need to convince residents to take responsibility together," Jett said. "Now that the mapping portion is done, we can tackle the neighborhood networking portion."

Jett is currently focusing on how to keep the Gentilly Project up to date. He also has e-mailed Mayor Ray Nagin with an offer to map the entire city, something he thinks could be done in a matter of weeks.

His view of the city has evolved as well. He now appreciates New Orleans as a place with diverse offerings, a place that, even where poor, offers such enduring qualities as strong family relationships and support systems.

"I wish the rest of the country had a human side like New Orleans, where there's a strong sense of faith," he mused. "Faith doesn't mean that bad things don't happen to you. It just means that you're human, and you work through it."

PUTTING US ON THE MAP

Here are some of the map projects going on in the city.

Gentilly Project: www.gentillyproject.com

The interactive map of about 20 Gentilly neighborhoods shows house-by-house status with four color-coded designations: blighted, gutted or under construction, renovated or occupied and vacant or demolished.

Rebuilding Map, The Times-Picayune: www.nola.com

An interactive map shows addresses in Orleans Parish where owners have applied for demolition, electrical or building permits and where homes have been sold. On home page, click on Multimedia at bottom left, then "Rebuilding New Orleans" under Graphics.

Beacon of Hope: www.lakewoodbeacon.org

Rebuilding progress maps are available for Lakewood North and Lakewood South as well as parts of Lakeview.

CityWorks: www.city-works.org

This map identifies the many neighborhoods of New Orleans and the neighborhood organizations active in each.

City of New Orleans: www.cityofno.com

The city has a GIS map of New Orleans that pinpoints blighted/adjudicated properties. On the home page, use the "departments" drop-down menu and select Blight Busters.