

Mount Carmel Academy New Orleans, Louisiana

The connection between New Orleans and the Sisters of Our Lady of Mount Carmel started back in 1833 when two Sisters journeyed from France to New Orleans, by invitation of the Archbishop, to care for the orphaned children of slaves.

On August 29, 2005 a Category 3 hurricane named Katrina hit the gulf coast states of Mississippi and Louisiana. Boasting wind gusts of up to 125 mph and waves topping 40 feet, Katrina left a path of death and destruction in its wake.

By 1840, the Sisters had opened Mount Carmel School, an all girls school in the St. Augustine area of New Orleans. The Sisters expanded and moved their ministry in 1926 into the outlying areas of New Orleans, where they constructed a four story building on land reclaimed from Lake Pontchartrain. That building housed a school on the lower level and served as a motherhouse on the upper floors. Today's Mount Carmel Academy is an 8th through 12th grade Catholic school for single young ladies in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Over the years, that one building has grown into many buildings, including a fine arts center, assembly hall and gymnasium, the original building still serves as a motherhouse with a pre-school located on the lower level.



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A Tale of Two Schools 5 Years after Katrina

The events from that day are indelibly etched in the minds of those who survived the storm and floods, even five years later. The memories are as fresh today as they were the day after, when the world got its first look at the storm's aftermath. Residents of the Gulf Coast have been cleaning up and rebuilding ever since. Following is the story of two schools in two cities that ended up in the path of one hurricane named Katrina.

St. Stanislaus College Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

Father Stanislaus Buteux, pastor of Our Lady of the Gulf parish in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, personally traveled to France in the 1850's to request that the Brothers of the Sacred Heart send representatives to his parish to open a school for boys.

In 1854, his request became reality when the Brothers founded St. Stanislaus Academy in Bay St. Louis. The school was named for Saint Stanislaus, in honor of Father Stanislaus. In 1870, the school became St. Stanislaus College awarding bachelor's and master's degrees. Then in 1923, it became a college preparatory school. Today St. Stanislaus College, a Catholic day and residency school for boys in grades 7 through 12, has grown from three buildings to an entire campus and is the oldest institution of learning on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.



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The Levees Break

On August 28, 2005 as Hurricane Katrina was moving across the Gulf of Mexico, Sister Camille Anne Campbell, O. Carm., principal of Mount Carmel Academy, found herself out of town. In Atlanta at the time, Campbell stayed up watching the news reports about the direction the hurricane would take once it made land. Feeling relatively comfortable that it was going to miss the city of New Orleans and Mount Carmel Academy, she went to bed around 2 a.m.

When the phone rang the next day, Campbell had no way of knowing what fate had in store for her. On the other end of the line was the parent of a Mount Carmel Academy student who broke the bad news. While the hurricane had missed the city, the storm surges caused the 17th Street Canal and the London Avenue Canal to break, leaving the school, which sits between the two levees, flooded with over 10 feet of water. ►

In those first few days after the storm, many people believed the damage to be too great to repair and reopen the school. Campbell, with a combination of faith and determination, set out to prove them wrong. “We had no choice but to come back,” declared Campbell, “if we didn’t come back, the oldest institution in the neighborhood, nobody was going to come back.” So, with her mind set, Campbell uttered four simple words ‘we will do it.’ And so began the painstaking job of cleaning up the school and grounds against nearly insurmountable odds.

Campbell’s first visit to the school after the levee breaks provided her a glimpse of the destruction, a yacht parked on the front porch of the motherhouse, another out back near the fence, water had completely damaged the first floors of the buildings to the point where almost nothing was salvageable. However, walking the hallways and

grounds in hazmat suits, Campbell and Beth Ann Simno, vice president of Mount Carmel Academy, discovered something remarkable. The school had many small religious statues on the side of one of its buildings and in front of the gym, all at ground level. Surprisingly, not one statue was ruined or damaged and all were in their original positions after the water receded. In the reception area, on the first floor of the administration building, was a statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. She sat on a pedestal recessed into the wall. When Campbell entered the building, the Blessed Mother statue was off of her pedestal, standing upright next to it, welcoming Sister back to the school, incredible since the entire first floor had been under water. “Not one statue on the property was toppled over,” related Campbell, “not one statue was ruined or damaged. It was most amazing!” ►

Disaster Strikes

August 2005

The Wrath of Katrina

On the morning of August 29, 2005, Brother Ronald Hingle, S.C., principal of St. Stanislaus College, was one of 125 people bracing for Hurricane Katrina on the second floor of the main school building in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The group was made up of Brothers, school staff and administrators, their family members and 50 students. Reconstructed after being destroyed by Hurricane Camille in 1969, the building stands on pilings with no load bearing walls on the first floor, as the walls are made to break away when hit by excessive water or debris. In addition, the second floor walls are made with a special mixture of cement so as to withstand gale force winds.

Earlier in the day, 13 people, including infants and children, had settled in on the second floor of the cafeteria building. As the wind and waves started to grow in force, Hingle received a distress call from the cafeteria. The first floor was completely under water and on the second floor the water had risen 5 feet and was continuing to climb. The only way out, a door leading from the second floor cafeteria out onto an elevated walkway, had been jammed shut by debris. Hingle and two other men launched a rescue effort amidst the hurricane winds, high waves and swirling waters. “We jumped in the water,” remembers Hingle, “and then we just walked. By the grace of God the walkway was

still there!” They managed to get the group back to the second floor of the main building only to discover the walls down one of the classroom hallways were breathing, moving in and out, as the hurricane raged outside. This time the trio had to use their combined force to open each solid oak classroom door, one at a time, dodging the breaking glass from the windows inside the classrooms.

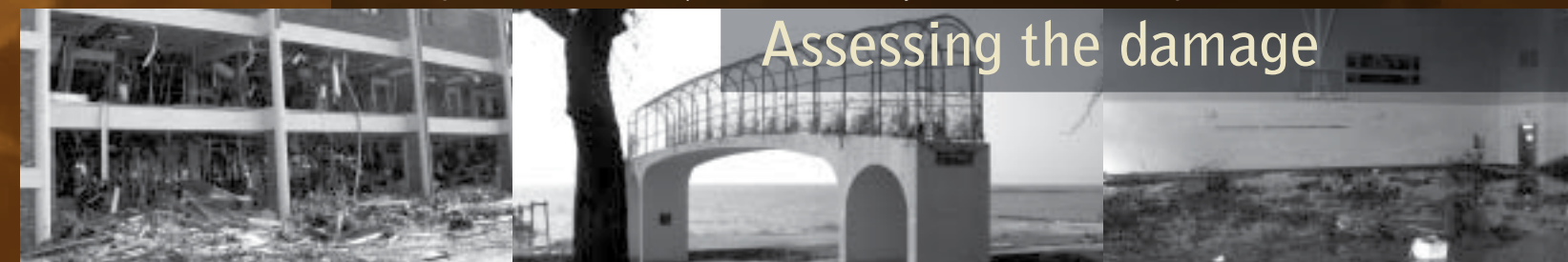
Once this task had been completed, a new danger emerged. A line of bubbles from the main gas meter to the school appeared. A gas leak. Turning off the meter would require braving the torrential rains and diving into what was now a raging river of water, an impossible feat. The only thing Hingle could do was move the extended group away from that corner of the building. “After we got all that squared away, we sat and prayed,” added Hingle.

Despite water reaching the second floor of the main building through an elevator shaft, rain pouring through the broken skylights, 30 foot waves pummeling the outer doors on the second floor and 125 mph winds, the building fulfilled its promise, it held strong against Katrina. As the group anxiously awaited the end of the storm they listened intently to the constant battering of the first floor with cars, water, debris and the sound of the walls eventually breaking away under the pressure. ►



The Aftermath

Images taken after the storm. Top: Mount Carmel Academy - Bottom: St. Stanislaus College



Assessing the damage

As the sun rose the following day, the campus was in complete shambles. Debris was scattered everywhere, walls were missing off buildings, cars were in buildings and hundreds of shrimp and jellyfish covered the gymnasium floor. All of the school records dating back to 1854 were completely gone, academic records also gone. Everything. Gone.

After surveying the devastating damage, the questions became, what do we do and how do we take care of our kids? To complicate matters, people from the community began to show up on campus, having nowhere else to go after losing their homes. They came to one of the few places still standing, the main school building at St. Stanislaus College. “We did not have time to sit and cry poor pitiful us,” relates Hingle, “we had kids that we had to take care of and we just had to get moving.”

Down to their last can of Spam and last few bottles of water, the questions and concerns of Hingle and his staff were answered when a Brother from Mobile, Alabama responded to their call for help and showed up in a big, white Trailways bus. The bus carried a load of supplies and once unloaded, was used to evacuate the children, students and elderly.

Then, a new set of questions arose, will we ever open again and where do we start? A school that in the course of its history withstood the Civil War, was burned to the ground, rebuilt, completely destroyed again by Hurricane Camille and rebuilt, would not be beaten by Hurricane Katrina. And so, Hingle with the same faith and determination that helped him weather the storm took a deep breath and said ‘let’s go!’ ►

Armed with a printout of FEMA rules and regulations, blueprints and construction plans, Campbell interacted with architects, construction workers, laborers and lawyers as she personally oversaw every aspect of the clean up. Instead of replacing the individual a/c units, a central plant was built to house the air conditioning and heating needs of the school, the carpets were replaced and walls, floors and ceilings were washed down and repainted. Campbell and her staff made sure the school was ready for students and classes in January 2006, just four months after the levee breaks. Rye grass, which grows quickly, was planted with the intent that the grounds would be green when students returned to school. "We wanted the neighborhood to know we're back and ready to start the return to normal," remembered Pamela Holahan, treasurer at Mount Carmel Academy, "a little oasis, where the grass was green and not

dead, an uncommon sight in those early days." The school also received generous donations of school supplies, blankets and money, by both the public and private benefactors.

Then it was back to school. Counselors were on hand to speak with the girls, many had lost their homes and some had lost everything. The school day, however, ran pretty much as it had before Katrina, school started at 7:50 a.m. and was dismissed at 3:15 p.m. Initially, one of the few things that did change was no one stayed beyond 5 p.m., there were no dances or activities since there were no neighbors and no security. The girls were encouraged to use the buddy system at all times, not to talk to strangers and to go straight home, whether home was a FEMA trailer or somewhere else. ▶

In the five years since Hurricane Katrina and the levee breaks, much has changed and much still remains the same. Campbell is still dealing with FEMA, project worksheets, requests for reimbursements and replacing the last of the contents destroyed in the flood. And now there are even more hurdles to overcome with the poor economy and the job market. The good news, student enrollment is up to almost 1,200 students for fall 2010, nearly matching the fall 2005 enrollment of 1,253.

With faith, prayer and determination Mount Carmel Academy weathered Katrina and came out on top. "Our

triumph is the increased blessing that we get on a daily basis. Our enrollment is back to what it was [before Katrina] and we're hiring teachers," boasts Simno, "to be the first back into the neighborhood, to be the beacon of hope to the community is major and I would just say it continues through today."

Holahan agrees, "Katrina will be with us for the rest of our lives. I think our main triumph after Katrina is that we're here. And now with the economy, stock market and the oil spill, we're still here and we're staying." ▶

Clean Up and Rebuild

Starting Over

A week after the storm's devastation there were 150 workers on the property starting to restore St. Stanislaus College. Under the leadership of Br. Ronald Talbot, S.C., priorities were set, work was started and construction began. And then an unexpected call.

A representative of two New York area Marianist high schools, Chaminade High School and Kellenberg High School, called Hingle to let him know they were coming down to St. Stanislaus to help rebuild. They were bringing donated tools, tents, food and a crew to cook. When Hingle told them he had no money to buy supplies, the schools sent a credit card to help with the purchase of supplies. "People were really wonderful," relates Hingle, "when we couldn't buy new band uniforms, the uniform company sent them anyway. We had lost all of our textbooks and book companies sent textbooks, backpacks and school supplies were donated."

Against all odds, St. Stanislaus College reopened on Tuesday, November 1, 2005, two months after the storm. When the doors opened that morning, there was no electricity, no internet, no phone service, no heat and

no potable water. What they did have; however, were students from the neighboring all girls school. Our Lady Academy had been badly damaged in the storm and St. Stanislaus College opened their school to them. The two schools shared resources while still functioning autonomously, until the following year when Our Lady Academy was reopened. The motto for the two schools became "Two Schools, One Spirit."

A large farm bell was used to signal class change and students and staff could help themselves to donated bottles of water. Electricity was finally restored the following Thursday afternoon. A psychologist was brought in and school counselors were available for students and staff. Teachers, staff and volunteers stayed after hours allowing students to study and do homework, which preceded the showing of movies complete with popcorn and soft drinks, luxuries most students no longer had at home.

In January 2006, then-President George W. Bush held a press conference in the newly restored gymnasium at St. Stanislaus College, a mere four months after Hurricane Katrina. ▶



Five Years Later

Images taken after rebuilding. Top: Mount Carmel Academy - Bottom: St. Stanislaus College



Returning to Normal

St. Stanislaus College is nothing if not resilient. Hingle continues to meet with FEMA on Hurricane Katrina claims, there are two buildings on campus that remain boarded up and the first floor of the main school building is still without utilities. In August 2008, Hurricane Gustav dealt another blow to St. Stanislaus College, the pier that had been rebuilt after Katrina was destroyed and the new library was flooded. Add to these challenges the current economic situation, the fact that many residents are still reluctant to move back into the area and the oil spill.

The biggest challenge St. Stanislaus College is facing in 2010 is enrollment. Before Hurricane Katrina, enrollment was at 530 students, including 165 resident students; five years later enrollment is 385 students, with only 84 resident students. As Hingle explains, "We really need students, we

need boarders. We have an unbelievable program, we have an unbelievable campus. We just need young people to take advantage of it." This fall the school will be offering a new 13th Year Program, which will help students transition from high school to college.

Reflecting on the enormity of Katrina and the challenges the school is still facing as a result, Hingle has a positive view about the whole experience, "Our kids were unbelievable. They volunteered to stay with us and help us rebuild. Our faculty and staff were also quite heroic. They put themselves last and the kids first." And as for the kindness of strangers, Hingle adds, "You can count on people when you really need them, they will be there for you. And when push comes to shove, their true colors will show. And they're beautiful colors." ▶

Today

New Orleans, Louisiana and Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

The streets of New Orleans, Louisiana and Bay St. Louis, Mississippi are still to this day a testament to the wrath of nature.

It's not uncommon to see a boarded up home with a faded red X on the door, vacant lots with overgrown vegetation, crumbling homes with broken windows, abandoned since the day Hurricane Katrina came ashore. The residents of these communities continue to rebuild their lives five years later. Some have simply given up and moved north while others still struggle with the scars left by the storm.

While all of these sights are reminders of the storm that raged on that late August day, there are other sights too, ones that bring hope — new roads and bridges, homes being rebuilt, new building construction, businesses finally starting to return, and of course, Mount Carmel Academy and St. Stanislaus College, testaments to faith, service and the resilience of the human spirit. ☼



Mount Carmel Academy, New Orleans, Louisiana



St. Stanislaus College, Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

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