BOOTS ON THE GROUND

January 26, 2007 By Regan Hofmann

As I was going through holiday pictures in my camera (the cats wrapped up in tinsel, the Christmas tree tied to the top of my mustang, etc.) I came across the shots I took of hurricane Katrina's aftermath in New Orleans. I had gone down to Louisiana for NAPWA's "Staying Alive: Access Matters" conference and NAPWA's executive director, Frank Oldham Jr., took the NAPWA board members on a tour of the devastation.

As the tour bus (floor to ceiling windows) trundled into the first neighborhood and we saw houses that had been struck by the flood waters, there were gasps of disbelief. The bus was filled with the agitated chatter of AIDS activists looking at another form of what can happen when the government responds too slowly, incorrectly or not at all to an obvious, massive, crippling force of nature. The big bus swung past houses with water marks above the tops of the first story windows. Giant trees lay toppled on crushed roofs, exposing the insides of the houses to the elements - ironically, a benefit as the mold was less bad in houses with exposure to sunlight and air. Cars sat crazily on top of other houses as if even the machines tried to escape the rising storm surge - and everywhere, there were dumpsters and front end loaders poised for clean-up, but in most neighborhoods, not a soul to be found. Looking at street after street after street of devastation it was hard to figure out even where to begin to start picking up the pieces. Add to that the fact that there is still no power, and no money from FEMA and it's no wonder it looks like the flood waters receded just a week ago.

People say it's starting to get better. In the wealthy, white neighborhoods, order has been restored. But in the poorer parts of town, it's still a mess. We were told that those whose houses were washed away completely, leaving only the cement slab and the foundation, were in better shape than those whose houses were crushed and waterlogged but stayed put because FEMA money would cover the rebuilding of new homes, but not the demolition and removal of debris necessary before any rebuilding could happen. Migrant workers live in tent villages and there are federally-funded, ad hoc trailer parks built behind chain link fencing to serve as temporary housing for displaced residents. There is no point in many of the residents of New Orleans coming back as they have no place to stay while they rebuild, and no money to literally clear the slate even if they could get their hands on the funds to rebuild their lives. The place seems froze in time, as if the waters ebbed - and nothing else moved.

Adding to the eerie feeling of the abandoned neighborhoods is the legion of dead oak trees throughout the affected areas. Of 4,000 trees planted in one park, 1,000 of them were killed by the flood waters - which were salty, and fatal to the trees. Their leafless branches point, dead, up to the sky like the machine guns carried by the National Guard soldiers, posted to keep order in abandoned areas. The guards aren't too busy; no one goes into the empty parts of town after dark.

The loud banter that filled the bus at the start of the tour died down as we got deeper into the area of destruction that is so massive, it's hard to fathom. Nearly a third of the city is gone or uninhabitable. And

as we got closer to groud zero - the place in the 9th Parish where the waters first burst through the levee, it got harder and harder to look out the window.

I'm human, and therefore, a rubber-necker. And, I'm a journalist. So, I was excited to have a chance to see for myself a situation that had gotten so much news coverage. But by half way through the tour, my hands were shaking so hard, it was difficult to take a photo.

Just as I was thinking to myself - "This can't be America," I saw a building that had been spray painted with big black letters. They read: BAGHDAD.

All the houses bore a cross of colorful paint. The cross was tilted to make an "X" - a sign, painted by relief workers, to indicate which unit had checked the house, the date and the number of survivors and the number of the dead. Some were marked "NE" which meant "not entered." Precarious buildings on the verge of collapse were avoided.

On one house, I saw this note: "Blk K-9 under porch." Indicating that there was a black dog trapped underneath the steps. Dead animals were not reflected in the body counts.

(Julie Davids, executive director of C.H.A.M.P., and I toured the New Orleans aquarium; nearly all the animals kept there died during the storm as the power was off for so long the tanks had no oxygen. Luckily, the aquarium has been restocked and it is a gorgeous tribute to underwater life. It seems so ironic to me that the aquatic animals in captivity died due to a flood of sea water...)

On the outside of other homes, people had written notes to loved ones: "Billy, gone to Tennessee. Call me. I love you."

On still others, pleas for help: "Need money to rebuild. Please call with donations." And always, a phone number - ten digits - the only thing left of a whole life washed away.

It would have been one thing to see that a couple of weeks after the storm. But it had been months. More than a year. And nothing. No response, no money, no hope.

The bus stopped in the 9th Parish and we got out. The only signs of life were beautiful white egrets tip toeing through the debris. I looked in the doorway of a house and tried to imagine that it was my house. I tried to imagine what I'd feel, whether I would want to roll up my sleeves and start dusting off the river's mud that coated everything like plaster. But that wasn't what I felt.

As we boarded the bus to head back to the conference site, the air was silent. People had stopped shaking their heads. We were just numb and confused. How could this happen in America? In my neighborhood, a house goes up in a matter of months. I'd heard that the people displaced from the poorest areas wondered out loud about whether it had been the city's - or the federal government's - intention to wash them all away so that the city could have a fresh start - and turn their streets and homes into a park. Standing in the 9th Ward, it doesn't seem an impossible notion. Not even a wild conspiracy theory. If this isn't the reason, than how can one explain the utter standstill and neglect?

My boyfriend was a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division of the U.S. Army. He was stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C. where there is always a unit on one hour recall which is prepared to have 'boots on the ground' anywhere in the world in 18 hours. He and I were talking about Katrina, and looking at the

pictures and he said, 'You're telling me we can get an entire brigade to Southeast Asia, ready to fight in less than 24-hours but you can't explain to me why it took three days to get the military stationed a couple of states away from North Carolina? The police couldn't handle it - they were afraid to go into certain areas. We had cops being shot. They feared for their lives. The 82nd Airborne are trained paratroopers and special operations soliders who are not afraid of wading through four foot high water. That's what they live for. They should have sent them in when we saw the category six storm rolling through the Gulf of Mexico. They would have had that city secured in two hours, despite the conditions. Not to mention rebuilt if tasked with that mission. We couldn't prevent the flood but we could have prevented the aftermath. I can't understand how we think we're capable of rebuilding Iraq when we can't even figure out how to get people back in their houses in New Orleans.'

Which brings me to Iraq. We watch while our government sends more of our soldiers to foreign lands to upheave, and then, allegedly, restabilize foreign governments. Meanwhile, parts of the U.S. continue to crumble. We watch America send money and meds overseas to fight AIDS, while Americans are dying at home because they can't get access to the meds that are available to others all around them - and now, to others around the world. We watch, and applaud, while Oprah Winfrey builds a school for young women in South Africa, while the young women of her home state have paltry access to education, let alone the proper sex education that could help them save their own lives by teaching them how not to get infected in a state with an HIV infection rate and access to care problems that are as bad as those in South Africa. Ms. Winfrey had a young woman on her show - I believe you know her, Marvelyn Brown - who shared her story of how she had never even heard of HIV before her own diagnosis. Ms. Winfrey and Ms. Brown are from the same southern city - Nashville. But even when we put empirical evidence on the most powerful American media vehicles like CNN and The Oprah Winfrey Show, our government, and too many Americans, continue to keep their eyes fixed on problems beyond our own shores.

As an American journalist, I am appalled that we are willing to reap the ratings of showing three solid days of hurricane Katrina blasting New Orleans, only to turn a blind eye to the critical follow-up story of what happened after the intial crisis. I was similarly disgusted to listen to President Bush's most recent State of the Union address which talked about AIDS as if it was 100% under control in the U.S.

Newsflash to President Bush: AIDS IS A DOMESTIC CRISIS. AND A QUITE SERIOUS AND EXPANDING ONE AT THAT. THE AREA YOU DRIVE THROUGH SO OFTEN TO REACH THE WHITE HOUSE - THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA - HAS AN HIV INFECTION RATE (1 IN 20 PEOPLE) RIVALING THAT OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA.

I watched the President's speech with the morbid curiosity of a rubber-necker, or a curious journalist, driving past an accident who can't help be fascinated at the thought of seeing the crash. But, similarly to how I felt as we drove deeper into the 9th Ward, I eventually had to turn away. It was too painful to watch. Particularly as President Bush discussed PEPFAR and his efforts to help those in foreign lands fight AIDS. I am all for America spreading our money and manpower and might to help address concerns on a global level. But I don't think we should focus exclusively on rescuing our neighbors when our own family members are left behind to drown, stay homeless, or die from AIDS while we ship troops, engineers and AIDS meds overseas.

From Lousiana to Mississippi to South Carolina, to many other states throughout this nation, we have conditions and needs that evoke images of Baghdad and AIDS-struck developing nations. My hope for the New Year is that AIDS activists throughout this country make President Bush, the new Democratic majority, and especially all political candidates with their sights on the White House aware that AIDS, poverty and access to healthcare are massive issues on the domestic front. And while we still have

homeless, impoverished, New Orleans residents unable to rebuild their lives, while we still have young women hearing of AIDS for the first time when they are diagnosed with it and while we still have people dying on ADAP wait lists, we have no right to be spending billions of dollars trying to fix the rest of the world. It has been said so many times that our foreign conceits are only a diversion to keep us from focusing on the horror in our own backyards. It’s all too true. Let’s get our best fighters’ boots on the ground in the good ole U.S. of A. The better we address our own issues, the better we will be positioned to help others in need, all around the world.

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