

# **THE VOICES OF KATRINA**

A Thesis

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an exploration into the lives of the people who were affected by Hurricane Katrina. Being one of those people, I can greatly empathize and understand the myriad of emotions that families endured during this tumultuous time. My intentions are to bring the viewer into a fragment of what it was like to live through such a tragedy.

## INTRODUCTION

I have been fortunate enough to call Baton Rouge my home for the past few years while attending graduate school here at Louisiana State University. Being close to family has always been important to me, and attending a college for graduate school only three hours away from home was the right choice for me. This became very evident, as of August 29, 2005, the day that we on the Gulf Coast and even people around the world will remember forever. I found myself understanding more than ever, what I wanted to do with my life. Being in such close proximity to a city that was completely devastated by a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina was horrific. In addition, having family that lives on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, it was hard to imagine when I first traveled down there what to expect.

The day after the Hurricane, I traveled to my hometown of Pascagoula, Mississippi to make sure my family was alive. With no communication via cell phone or otherwise, I was worried immensely about their well-being. The drive home on I-10 was just the crescendo to what was to lie ahead. Giant billboard signs off the interstate were knocked over like cardboard boxes; 20-foot tall pine trees along the roads were leveled to the ground, and metal road signs were bent over at ninety-degree angles like a broken toothpick. When traveling into Pascagoula, I felt like I was traveling into a war zone. I was greeted by a man in a military issued vehicle who waved me around a fallen tree to lead me to a detour towards my home. The sites all around the town were riddled with debris lying something like a bomb had just gone off.

I finally made it to my mother's home, and just like every house along the way, the fallen trees spelled disaster. All the trees in the yard were completely uprooted. We

had a new boat in the front yard that traveled from five houses down the street, and we had inherited a new children's swing set from the neighbors. I was very relieved to find my mother and stepfather along with my brothers already trying to salvage what they could of the house, and elated to see that everyone was alive.

“Everything we owned was in this house. When we came back, there was nothing left, nothing but the brick walls. All I had was the memories”

-Miz Pearl, City Adrift, 2005

However, the outside appearance of the house itself did not look too bad. The inside had been moved around and caked with a mixture of sewer and seawater. After several days of gutting out what were the remains of the home that I grew up in, there was not much left to salvage but a few photo albums that bled ink from all the water. Some of the photographs we dried out in the sun and were able to salvage. Everything my mother had worked hard for her entire life, and all my childhood memories were all gone. The years of laughter and fond recollections were sadly erased in a few hours with the tormenting winds of the ravaging hurricane that swept our dreams and memories away.

I found myself wondering about how others had fared in this storm. How were we all supposed to pick up our lives and move on from this? Reports coming from New Orleans seemed to be even worse than what I was experiencing in Mississippi. The rising water had stayed, and no help would enter the city due to the looters and incessant violence that was taking place. While in Mississippi, we were fortunate to have the National Guard passing out rations of MRE's and the Red Cross passing out water to all of us, others in New Orleans were not as lucky. America saw itself in the mirror that day

and became a reflection of the good but also the bad. We were vulnerable at times and became stronger from the experiences. The hardships that were so prevalent and seemingly insurmountable followed the rise of strong resolve and great outpour of caring for their fellow man.

“As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.”

*-Carl Gustav Jung*

In the most horrific of times, it seemed that we were all witnessing something of a third world country in the United States. The site of leveled homes, no access to clean water and people with no way of transportation due to their car being flooded was all too surreal. With no power, there was no air conditioning, no refrigerator with fresh food, and no communication even on cell phones. Local hospitals could not treat their patients due to the loss of power, and their generators had been flooded. At times, it seemed that there was no hope.

On my return to Baton Rouge, I had been told that a majority of the now homeless people from New Orleans, “victims of Katrina”, were migrating to Baton Rouge. Therefore, I immediately contacted a friend from the Food Bank of Baton Rouge to ask how I could be of assistance. He gave me a list of all the shelters that were in need of help. After receiving the list, I began visiting each shelter and offering my services. All the shelters greeted me with open arms and treated me like family. I helped with simple tasks of unloading supplies that the Food Bank had donated and working in the kitchen.

After several weeks, I had built a connection to some of the people that had been devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

After experiencing the pain and destruction that this Hurricane brought to my family and then coming back home to Baton Rouge, I started to feel that there was something that I could do in my work to express these frustrations and the voices of these people. In getting to know these people, they shared their stories with me. Many stories of fear, heart break and humble gratefulness. I believe these people that I had known for such a short time were opening up for a sense of closure. During this time, I started to interview people in hopes to document their experiences I have personally been affected in my life by their stories.

## THE CONCEPT

The concept is driven by my passion to learn more about how I can help communicate and educate people on Hurricane Katrina. As graphic designers, we communicate to people a message and educate the viewer on subjects that are important to our clients as well as important to us personally. Hurricane Katrina is a topic on which I feel very strongly. The disaster has personally affected the lives of my family, and I feel educating people about the facts of the hurricane is a very important topic for me. In a practice, such as graphic design, we have the ability to educate and persuade people about events such as Hurricane Katrina. Therefore, on this topic, I believe there is much to be learned; it was one of the most devastating natural disasters in US history. Thus, I believe now more than ever, the general population has a heightened awareness and cares to be informed about the world around them.

In 2000, a very well known manifesto was published in *Émigré* magazine that has been a strong influence in my beliefs towards graphic design ever since I read it years ago.

“WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents. Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it. Encouraged in this direction, designers then apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles. Commercial work has always paid the bills,

but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.” (Émigré, 2000)

As well, “Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent, we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse. There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.” (Émigré, 2000)

Yet most importantly, “We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication - a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of debate is shrinking; it must expand. Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.”<sup>1</sup>

With designers such as Milton Glaser, Tibor Kalman, Ken Garland, and Steven Heller endorsing this belief, it has influenced my perception of design immensely. Since

reading this manifesto, I have been involved in a lifestyle influenced by a design-concerned world; I have surrounded myself in a world of information design. I am always wondering what I can do to help make a difference with my design work. From educating the viewer with hard facts, to provoking the viewer with heart-felt emotion, I believe the designer can make a difference.

In our present age of America, with fear of terrorism, a country at war, and incompetent politicians, we are in an age of uncertainty. Our fears can get the best of us, and maybe they did during what is now known as one of the single most tragic natural disasters in American history. A storm that ripped through homes of the Gulf Coast in a matter of hours is still affecting the people trying to rebuild their homes and lives over two years later. The stories that were told will be passed down from generation to generation. They will be stories describing times of fear and uncertainty. This is a part of who we are and who we will be in the future. The impact of this storm is a scar upon us all.

## THE WORK

The body of the work consists of large prints. I believe that giving the viewer a visual representation of the voices will bring the viewer more into the lives of the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

The panels of work will be broken up into two segments. The personal voices and the visual impact of emotion will be conversely paralleled by the tragedy itself. The imagery of Hurricane Katrina and its effects symbolizes the raw emotion of the quotations from the people who lived through Katrina.

I began this body of work in attempts to better understand the effects that Katrina had on people and how design can help these matters. After working in shelters and hearing the stories from various walks of life, I began to understand that out of the many lessons we had learned of living through Katrina, the stories that were told became the centerpiece of my attention. We all know FEMA and the government had failed these people. It had become an understood fact. However, the honesty and the impact of their stories will live on forever. These are the stories that will be passed on from generation to generation... "I remember Katrina".

With the emphasis being placed equally on the quotations, as well as on the imagery, I choose to make the fonts stand out. The fonts that I choose to use on the quotations were Helvetica 45 Light and Gill Sans Extra Bold. I choose a lighter font to start the quotation and to build the intensity of the quotation to a much bolder font that was expressing their feelings and experiences. The colors of the fonts were chosen to complement the colors of the imagery they were describing.

### **Dewayne Martin from Harvey, Louisiana**

I meet Dewayne in a small church in Baton Rouge several months after Katrina had drove people out the New Orleans. He was wearing only a white T-shirt and jeans; that was all he claimed that made it form his small apartment after the storm hit. When speaking with him, he told me about all the things he lost in the storm and how hard he is going to have to work to replace them. He went on the say

“I remember when I use to ride to work in my car everyday with homeless people with a sign on the side of the road asking for food, I’m in their shoes now; I have no place to stay...”“This storm really destroyed my life, I have to start all over again. In a way it destroyed me and in a way it helped me.”

As I went on, I asked him if the storm had changed him, or if it had affected his life for the better. He Said:

“It changed me by taking life more seriously, and I value my life more”

In my amazement in the worst of circumstances, he found something to hold on to that was positive.

### **Sharleen Skills from New Orleans, Louisiana**

Sharleen Skills was living in Uptown New Orleans on Tchoupitoulas and Valmont Street when the storm came in. She and her husband decided to stay trough the hurricane thinking that this would be like Hurricane Georges and pass by New Orleans. Little did she anticipate that she would experience first hand one of the worst storms New Orleans had ever seen. The most vivid memory that she could recall was right after the storm. The water was rising and forced them out onto the roof of their home. She looked over and saw her neighbor shouting out for her husband crying in a frantic terror. The woman

cried:

“I know my husband’s dead. When he went to go help someone, he went under the water and never did come back up.”

Directly after the storm they were placed in a shelter in Baton Rouge.

“It was a blessing to share encouragement with others, because we were are all in the same boat.”

### **Michael Brown from New Orleans, Louisiana**

While I was working at Green Chapel in Baton Rouge, I meet Michael Brown. He was very soft-spoken man that always had a smile on his face. He was just another native of New Orleans bused into Baton Rouge with no home and nowhere to go. Yet the more I started to volunteer at Green Chapel I noticed that he was always in good sprits. In a time of loss and devastation he still held his head high. Therefore, I asked him one day “how do you have such a positive outlook on life when this happens to you?” He went on to say:

“After the storm, people and complete strangers have embraced me with love and concern and compassion. They are some of the greatest people I have ever met. I feel blessed.”

This was just one of the many responses that I received from people who had lost everything and still had a positive outlook on the future. I was amazed at first, but it seemed to become an underling theme. These people had lost literally everything. From material things like their homes to loved ones dying, they still had a strong faith that everything was going to work out.

## CONCLUSION

After talking with many people from various walks of life that had been affected by this horrific storm, I learned there are many lessons that can be taken away from the experience. I am very thankful to have been a part of these people's lives, if only for a second. I sincerely appreciate how complete strangers would open up so much to let people in on a glimpse of their lives. It seems the stories they shared were a part of the healing process to move on. Some tell to remember, as if this is not even real. It seems to them that it did not even happen. It helps them get closure and realize what happened. Others tell to comfort each other, as to say, "I have been through this too, and you will make it." As Dewayne Martin put it, "I value my life more." In tragedy, there is an innate humbleness that can overwhelm us. To witness people and even family going through this is tough, and it is a helpless feeling at times. However, the strength of character that is gained from the experience is an immense characteristic to be gained.

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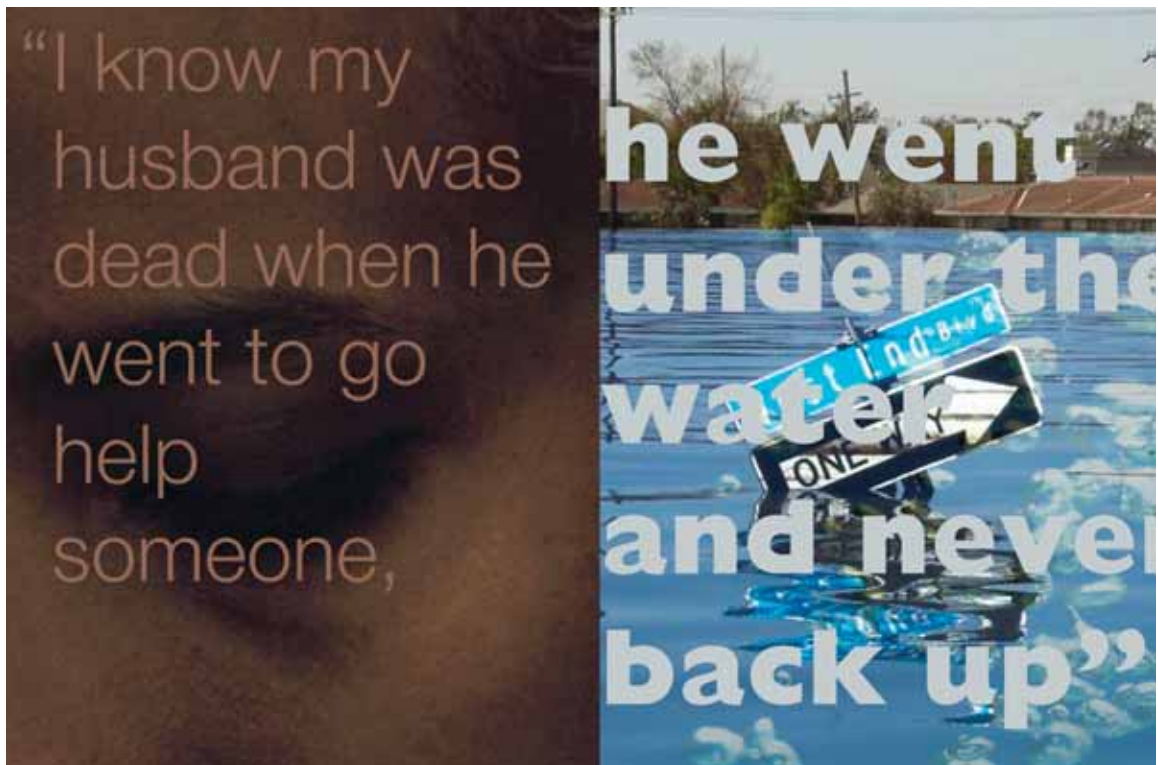
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APENDIEX A: GALLERY IMAGES



Destroyed



“I know my husband was dead when he went to go help someone,

he went under the water and never back up”

**Loss**



**Flight**



**Helpless**



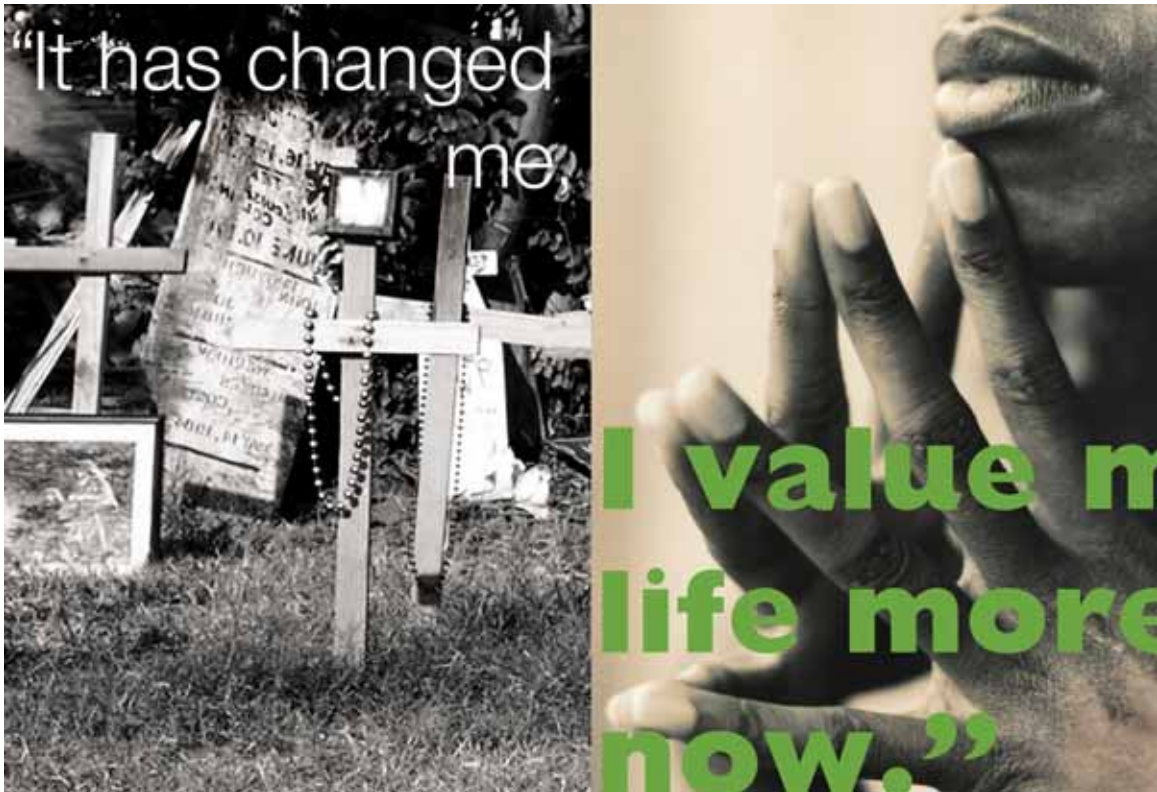
Seasons



“It’s very painful  
and my  
heart cries,

**the thought  
seeing the  
aftermath  
of Katrina”**

**Aftermath**



Change



**New Start**

## **VITA**

David Allen Gallop was born in Pascagoula, Mississippi in 1978. In 2003, he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of South Alabama. He will receive his Master of Fine Arts degree from Louisiana State University in December 2007.