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Talk Of The Town: First Person

Radio Free NOLA

A WMNF reporter takes community radio to still-ravaged New Orleans.

BY ANDREW STELZER

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The burnt-to-a-crisp car sitting on the sidewalk on St. Claude Avenue hadn't moved in the past month.

My second time back to New Orleans since Katrina, I guess I knew what to expect -- nothing new. Traffic lights still not working, corrupt "rebuilding commissions" still in battles with community activists, and the 2006 hurricane season still approaching fast. But my hope this time around was to breathe some outside air into the spirited misery of a city that seems to be stuck in September 2005. Along with community radio reporters from Houston, Washington, D.C, New Haven, and NOLA itself, Free Speech Radio News (FSRN) had organized a three-day-long radio news reporting training, with the hope of helping the people tell their own stories, instead of having Anderson Cooper and Geraldo do it for them.

FSRN often does training sessions in Third World countries like Iraq, India and Bolivia, so New Orleans in 2006 wasn't much of a stretch. We all gathered for breakfast at the home of Christian Roseland, a local reporter who coordinated the training. "I feel like I'm isolated here," he told us over eggs and grits. Roseland had lived in New Orleans before, but was trained in radio at Pacifica station KPFA in Berkeley, Calif.; after Katrina, he immediately moved back to cover the aftermath. New Orleans has no community radio station with any news component; as a result, his daily reports about the struggle to rebuild have been heard nationwide, but not locally.

We held the training in a classroom at Xavier College, the only historically black college in the city that has reopened its campus. The rules have never applied in the Big Easy, so having a mostly white training team come through the doors didn't raise too many eyebrows. Ashley Thomas, a reporter for the student newspaper, thanked us while lamenting that "no one ever comes to Xavier," especially since the storm. Many universities have not reopened at all, and those that have are severely hampered by a lack of resources and the popping of the student-life bubble. In the current Xavier Herald, the paper asked students what they miss the most -- besides "the gym floor," "my friends that are no longer here" and "the faculty that lost their jobs," one student is sad that he can't get crawfish for two bucks a pound down the street anymore. Now everyone eats in the cafeteria, since all the local businesses are gone.

Having done many trainings before, we knew the challenges of any no-fee, no-frills, grassroots skill session. The goal is to provide the trainees with tools to become wage-earning reporters, but people have lives to live, and three days is a lot to give. The post-storm hurdles facing our students, however, became instant story material.

Thomas's home had been destroyed, and she was pissed that her sister had come down from Baton Rouge to take a "Katrina bus tour" of her old neighborhood, then "called me up all excited and said, 'I just passed by your house!'" Courtney Green, who's hoping to graduate this year, was sympathetic, but believes the tours may be good -- she saw people moved by the experience of seeing entire neighborhoods in a post-apocalyptic state. "It drove them not just to crying but to bawling ... boo-hoo crying." If they don't see it, many in the group surmised, they'll never really understand it.

Xavier professor Arnold Crump, who gave us a classroom and computer lab to use for free, now lives in a trailer across the street from the school. "I was just beginning to learn digital radio production when Katrina hit," he explains. "But the studio and radio station were destroyed."

Lew Myrick came down for the training from the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, where fallen trees chopped homes in half and a migration north from the Gulf Coast has created a housing crisis in the heart of the Deep South. Kim Leduff, a Southern Miss communications professor, is in New Orleans every weekend helping her parents rebuild their home, so coming to Xavier was a break in her weekly routine.

Street musicians getting price-gouged on rent. Xavier not providing support to now-homeless and confused students. Students suffering mental breakdowns. Previously gentrifying neighborhoods now frozen in time. Walk 10 feet down the street and you'll see a front page-worthy injustice; stay for a week and you'll be involved in one.

The assignment for the students was to complete a two-minute report about some element of the daily drama that life has become. Not everyone pulled it off: Xavier student Javartee Bobino had some potential, but transportation problems meant he disappeared after Saturday. Community activist Crystal Mohammed showed up only for a few hours (she's since had to relocate to Houston); Mayaba Liebenthal, who'd already done reports for FSRN before the training, came Friday but on Saturday had to attend a rally to save a local hospital. Twelve people signed up, nine people attended, and only five completed their assignments.

While some potentially good reporters came out of the weekend (Lew Myrick's story on street musicians was scheduled to air this week on WMNF in Tampa), the unexpected result was the human infrastructure that evolved. Crump from Xavier 's station got to talk with trainee Brian Denzer from Tulane's WTUL (which has been broadcasting out of a coffee shop for the past few months), and with a DJ from Common Grounds' pirate radio project, which may or may not broadcast depending on the day of the week. They all hope to share programming and were inspired to plan other joint training sessions in the future. Everyone learned some basic radio skills, and began to understand the power of communicating their stories to the people who don't get to take the Katrina bus tour of the lower Ninth Ward.

Maureen Missauvage simply kept her recorder on while she and a friend walked around a neighborhood and pointed out where all the businesses used to be. "It sounded really good," she reported back to the class the next morning. "At the time I thought it was a social chat, but I think it's bigger than that."

"We did this in a building with a bottom floor that is still gutted, where the station has been destroyed, at the only black college that's back open in New Orleans," reflected Roseland. Initially, he was disappointed at the number of people who made it through to Sunday afternoon. But on the phone two weeks later, he'd developed some perspective. "Having people come to me and say I heard you did this, it sounds cool, I'd like to participate if you do it again is about the best recommendation I could get."

Now if only the electricity were back on throughout the city...how 'bout it, Mr. President?

Andrew Stelzer is a reporter and news anchor for WMNF-88.5 FM.

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