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“We Believe in One New Orleans”: Embracing Diversity Post-Katrina

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Hazel S. Parker²

INTRODUCTION

Last Tuesday night fifty African American professional men and women gathered to begin a year-long series of public conversations with the Human Relations Commission (HRC). HRC moderators Margaret Montgomery-Richard and Russell Carll initiated a dialogue about race, poverty, and the future of New Orleans—a dialogue that was marked equally by honesty, wisdom, and civility. For two solid hours, speaker after speaker rose to affirm, by what they said and who they are, the historic achievement and competence of the African American community. They pointedly named barriers outside, and problems inside, of their community which limit and destroy the precious human potential of New Orleans. They spoke candidly about the unbearable burdens that a 30 percent pre-Katrina poverty level created for this city. They spoke with particular intensity of the tragedy of young African American men standing on corners and roaming the streets without hope for the future; men without a reason to live or respect life. While emphasizing that racism is by no means simply a thing of the past in New Orleans, their focus was on the need to lay down blame and take up the critical business at hand.

One of the historic voices defining the soul of New Orleans has made itself heard once again. Now, the Human Relations Commission is seeking a new, inclusive future of partnership for the well-being of the city. All are welcome in this place.³

I. LISTENING TO NEW ORLEANS AFTER KATRINA

The letter to the editor quoted above describes the beginning of an intensive, disciplined public dialogue that the Human Relations Commission (HRC) of the City of New Orleans undertook in 2007, after the terrible disruptions unleashed by Hurricane Katrina. The purpose of this effort was to examine the state of relations between and among the groups that constitute the rich culture of the city of New Orleans, and to oversee the implementation of specific recommendations for increasing respect and inclusion of all perspectives based on what the HRC heard during that public dialogue.

The HRC consists of an executive director and eighteen members nominated by the mayor, city council members, or local college and university presidents. Its mandate is to receive, investigate, mediate, and, when alternate remedies fail, adjudicate complaints of discrimination related to protected classes.⁴ The HRC also actively promotes awareness of and respect for diversity. In the wake of events that inflame racial, religious, or other intergroup tensions, the mayor may request that the HRC hold public hearings to discuss the events and make recommendations to the mayor, city council, and private organizations on addressing the sources of conflict. Preceding Katrina, the HRC's most recent exercise of that role followed the killing of a tourist, Mr. Levon Jones, by bouncers outside a French Quarter bar on December 31, 2004.⁵

In this article, we present details of the public conversations convened by the HRC in the wake of Katrina, the specific action steps the HRC recommended as a result of what its members heard, and the status of their implementation. Before we do so, it is important that we give the reader some sense of the social realities of pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans.

II. A HISTORY OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The history of New Orleans dates back to the period when European colonial powers governed Louisiana.⁶ Various settler groups have played a

critical role in the wonderful, complex web of cultures that exist in New Orleans today.⁷ Louisiana was culturally, demographically, and economically part of the Spanish and French empires during its formative years, becoming part of the United States formally in 1803.⁸

African slaves from across the continent were brought to Louisiana during the French colonial period between 1719 and 1731.⁹ From 1731 to the mid-1860s, about three hundred additional slaves came to Louisiana, most from a single region in Africa, the Senegal River Basin.¹⁰ They brought their Bambara culture with them and intermarried with the local Native Americans living in the region.¹¹

Canada also played a role in the diverse development of New Orleans. Colonies founded in Canada and Louisiana began on modest scales in areas with great river ecosystems inhabited by Native Americans.¹² When the French Canadians fled their colony following the triumph of British arms there, they journeyed *en masse* to Louisiana, and the “Acadians” became the “Cajuns,” members of the French-speaking subculture that enriches Louisiana and the world to this day.¹³ The arduous journey of the Acadians to Louisiana is chronicled in Longfellow’s classic epic poem “Evangeline,” a name long celebrated in Cajun music and literature.¹⁴

Native Americans, drawn to trapping skills used in the French fur trade,¹⁵ were eventually captured and kept as slaves until the end of the colonial period.¹⁶ Additionally, Governor Bienville and his successors worked to restore peace with the Native Americans by reconstructing a French alliance system with friendly tribes. Simultaneously, they reduced the power of unfriendly tribes by detaching them from the English trade network, which offered better goods to the tribes at cheaper prices, and reattaching them to the French colonial economy.¹⁷ The French allowed Native Americans to keep their land.¹⁸ Other tribes living along the Gulf Coast also participated in colonial market economies. An all Native American market was established and lasted until around 1867.¹⁹ While it may have appeared as though the Native Americans vanished from New Orleans, in fact they

blended into the African community through intermarriage.²⁰ One living cultural legacy of the fusion of New Orleans's Native American and African heritages is found in the annual appearances of the vibrant Mardi Indian marching tribes on the streets of New Orleans.²¹

In the early sixteenth century, the only other identifiable local ethnic group in the French/French Canadian society of New Orleans was German.²² Many had come to New Orleans after the Native American unrest following the Natchez War.²³ In the city, the Germans, settling with Swiss-German mercenaries, became workmen and tavern keepers.²⁴ They intermarried with the French, and many of their names were pronounced in the French fashion.²⁵

When Louisiana became part of the United States in 1803, a deep African legacy existed throughout the territory.²⁶ The Afro-Creole culture was well established with its own folkloric, musical, religious, and historical traditions.²⁷ The Louisiana Creole language was brought by the slaves who came to the United States between 1719 and 1731 and is still spoken today by tens of thousands of people, both black and white.²⁸ Afro-Creole folklore, religion, and music—most notably jazz—spread upriver to Memphis and Chicago, then to New York and Los Angeles, and eventually across the nation and the world.²⁹ The emergence of Voodoo in Louisiana can probably be attributed to the slaves from the Bight of Benin in Africa, along with the massive immigration of Haitians in 1809.³⁰ The Haitian refugees expelled from Cuba included white Creoles, free people of color, and their slaves.³¹

During the nineteenth century, there was a massive migration of white Americans to New Orleans from New York and various places along the northeastern seaboard to do business.³² The population of New Orleans during the 1830s and 1840s was comprised most significantly of Irish and German immigrants, as well as free persons of color. The newcomers soon took charge of the mercantile economy and expanded the city's wealth, but the Creoles were able to retain political power in Louisiana until the

1830s.³³ Another very unusual situation in New Orleans at this time was the large number of free people of color who owned land and held professional occupations, as compared to other cities in the United States.³⁴

Before the Civil War, New Orleans ranked second only to New York as the nation's leading port of immigration with the above-mentioned French, German, and Irish immigrants dominating.³⁵ After the 1860s, New Orleans' immigrant population expanded to include Spaniards, Latin Americans, Greeks, Dalmatians, Chinese, Filipinos, and Italians.³⁶ The historical and cultural roots of New Orleans run deep and are profoundly intertwined.

III. THE BIG (UN)EASY: PRE-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

Centuries of rich interplay among the ethnic and religious groups whose history we have just briefly reviewed created the cultural gumbo that made the city of New Orleans a popular tourist destination, beloved by millions as the "Big Easy" or the "City That Care Forgot."³⁷ The music, food, and ambience of the French Quarter make it one of the world's favorite destinations. However, local residents are painfully aware of the other side of the legendary charms of "N'Awlins." Whoever first said, "It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there," was probably just back from a visit to New Orleans. Our city is both a wonderful and difficult place to live, work, and raise a family. What was the shape of that difficulty before the storm?

From the end of World War I through the civil rights era, New Orleans experienced shifting patterns of race relations and racial tensions moving from segregation, through an integrationist period, to desegregation.³⁸ African Americans organized to address issues of segregation and unequal treatment through nonviolent protests, including sit-ins at segregated downtown shops.³⁹ Many worked hard and took risks to increase the number of African American voters, who would become and remain the political majority in New Orleans.⁴⁰ Numerous groups, like the local

affiliates of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), formed during the first half of the twentieth century, and tension subsequently grew between these nonviolent groups and the young militants.⁴¹ Through these efforts New Orleans created its own pantheon of civil rights heroes.⁴²

Today, New Orleanians live in post-Katrina time, as New Yorkers, and indeed all Americans, live post-9/11. The harrowing experience inflicted upon the city by the force of Katrina's winds and waters, multiple failures of canals, disastrous federal response, and the dishearteningly slow pace of what passes for our "recovery," have effaced the memory of New Orleans before the storm, leaving us in a collective nostalgic fog, longing for something like normalcy.⁴³ But if "nostalgia is bad memory," as one pundit put it, then we must take a moment to recall the state of New Orleans when Mayor Nagin called for an urgent evacuation on the morning of August 27, 2005: the New Year's Eve killing of a young black man by bouncers in the French Quarter and another by police in a stolen truck in our neighboring parish,⁴⁴ contentious and bitterly divisive school board meetings as our public schools slid into full-blown chaos,⁴⁵ "secret shopper" investigations revealing that African Americans were consistently charged more for the same drinks in French Quarter bars than whites,⁴⁶ black pastors remaining silent while their most prominent spokesperson defamed our newly elected progressive black mayor as "a white man in black skin,"⁴⁷ a successful employment discrimination lawsuit by white plaintiffs against the first black New Orleans district attorney,⁴⁸ police confrontations with the Mardi Gras Indians,⁴⁹ and suburban white ladies robbed at gunpoint by young black men.⁵⁰

All of the above events streamed together into a downward spiral of racial tension in New Orleans. Local media provided a steady stream of images showing people venting racial rage and frustration in school board meetings and of perpetrators and victims of violence. Our legally

desegregated, but far from integrated, city was increasingly polarized racially. Katrina was not the only hurricane on our horizon.

IV. DISORIENTED, DISORGANIZED, AND OPEN TO CHANGE: POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

Pre-Katrina racial and social tensions in New Orleans were altered but not resolved by the storm. Change in the demographic makeup has brought new strains, and new bridges between and among groups have appeared since August 2005.

Since Hurricane Katrina flooded most of New Orleans, drowning its infrastructure,⁵¹ ethnic and religious group numbers have shifted internally and relative to each other.⁵² However, diversity continues to be the hallmark of New Orleans, increasing daily with the arrival of workers to participate as the city rebuilds and communities become whole again. New Orleans today continues to be a patchwork of many cultures and ethnic groups working and living together.⁵³

Before Hurricane Katrina, African Americans made up 67 percent of the population in the city while Caucasians made up 26 percent.⁵⁴ After the storm, African Americans still remained the majority, making up 58 percent with Caucasians comprising 34 percent.⁵⁵ The population is slowly returning, but it is still not where it was before Katrina. In 2006, nearly one year after the storm, the city's population had dropped from 452,000 to somewhere around 223,000.⁵⁶

Other post-Katrina demographic shifts in the New Orleans population are also noteworthy. The population is older than it was before the storm. While the under-45 population became smaller, numbers in the 45 to 54, 55 to 64, and 65 and older categories increased.⁵⁷ Post-Katrina, there is also a significantly higher percentage of adults who are college graduates and a smaller percentage of individuals living below poverty.⁵⁸ The latter is due, of course, to the thousands of poor people involuntarily displaced by the storm who cannot or choose not to return.⁵⁹

Practitioners of community organizing teach would-be citizen activists that organizing something new often requires disorganization of the *status quo*.⁶⁰ Katrina thoroughly disorganized settled and largely dysfunctional social, political, and economic relationships in New Orleans, thus creating openings for profound change, for better and for worse. One dramatic example is the school system in New Orleans. Prior to Katrina, 46 percent of schools in the district were “academically unacceptable” in 2003–2004.⁶¹ Three years later, many profound and sweeping changes in the public urban school district are underway.⁶² The outcomes remain in doubt, but the progress achieved to date is substantial and would have been unimaginable apart from Katrina’s interruption of business as usual.⁶³

Much of the tension and conflict in post-Katrina New Orleans is best understood as a contest among groups over the opportunities that Katrina has created. One possible outcome is a return to the pre-Katrina days of black political power in a standoff with white economic power, an economy that continues to spiral downward, and little constructive public engagement across ethnic and class lines. Another is New Orleans as a much smaller, gentrified tourist destination paralleling the east and west banks of the Mississippi, a “slivers by the river” with fewer poor people, a small group of wealthy individuals, a shrunken middle-class, and a poorly educated working class with limited options in a tourist economy. Another is the “new New Orleans” that many have dreamed of and worked to build out of Katrina’s devastation—one New Orleans with public institutions serving all citizens fairly and efficiently, embracing its diversity with respect and gusto, offering educational and economic opportunity to all who are willing to learn and work, and citizens who trust and respect one another.

Pre-Katrina racial and other social tensions in New Orleans were altered but not resolved by the storm. New strains and new bridges between and among groups have appeared since August 2005. In the painful, but promisingly disorganized setting of post-Katrina New Orleans, the HRC

initiated a serious, sustained public conversation about diversity, respect, inclusion, and transformation.

V. EMBRACING DIVERSITY, BRIDGING DIVISIONS

Diversity strengthens any community that can acknowledge its differences; respect and celebrate what each social, cultural, and religious group brings to its mix; and strive to practice inclusive politics by seeking compromises based on shared group interests. But differences between and among groups can also be, and often are, the basis of exclusion, domination, and division as America's chronic racial and religious tensions have shown. Unified diversity is an irreplaceable source of social strength and peace; divided diversity is a prescription for conflict and ongoing tensions between cultural groups. For our city to function as one New Orleans, it was the HRC's judgment that these differences and exclusions need to be named and heard in public forums where people felt free to share their feelings and insights. The commission assured participants that their disclosures would lead to a specific set of recommendations for change that the HRC would commit to have implemented.

On December 31, 2006, Mayor C. Ray Nagin, city council members, and the HRC announced a major diversity initiative entitled "We Believe in One New Orleans: A Public Conversation with the Human Relations Commission." Between January 2007 and January 2008, the HRC conducted monthly public "listening sessions" with the diverse ethnic, sexual, and religious groups that make up the social and cultural fabric of New Orleans.⁶⁴ In each session, the particular group presented its cultural history and contributions to New Orleans, identified ways in which the group's members felt excluded from full participation in the city, and made specific suggestions for changing situations characterized by these examples of public disrespect.

Cultural, social, and religious groups accepted the HRC's invitation to participate in these public conversations. Participating groups included

African American professionals; Caucasian professionals; descendants of the Italian, Irish, English, German, Greek, and French cultures; public housing residents; African American organizers and community activists; members of the Asian, Hispanic, and Arab American communities; members of faith communities; and members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

Through the above groups, over five hundred people participated in the listening sessions, including residents of every city council district. Members of the HRC listened intently as participants voiced their experiences. All sessions were transcribed by a court reporter. The transcript was subsequently analyzed and emerging themes and patterns were identified within and across all groups.

Members of the HRC then carefully reviewed the emergent themes from the public conversations and made twelve specific recommendations which will be presented in the last section of this article.⁶⁵ The HRC's analysis of themes, recommendations, and visions for the future were compiled in a full report presented to the city council by the Human Relations Commission in March 2008.⁶⁶

A. What New Orleans Said

I have been living here for fifteen years. After seeing what I have seen in other cities, New Orleans—gay, straight, black, white—is the most accepting city of other people. New Orleans is the city of diversity, and I think that is one thing that we have all been very proud of. I think that is one thing that we have all worked really hard at.

When we start to divide ourselves into race and class and ignore the real killer of all of us, which is crime and lack of educational opportunity in our city for all of our citizens, then we're hurting ourselves.

If we don't solve this issue of trusting each other, to get along and understand each other, respecting each other, then I don't think that the rest of it really matters. The rest of it is really temporary.⁶⁷

The four topics raised most frequently during the listening sessions were race and diversity, facing and embracing our differences, criminal justice, and education. Nine additional topics were raised frequently by participants: economic opportunity, selection of political leaders, social involvement, city government, working conditions of immigrants, the portrayal of New Orleans in the media, housing, promoting self-sufficiency, and health.⁶⁸

During the sessions, participants shared powerful and poignant thoughts about their feelings of disrespect, exclusion, acceptance, and lack of communication. What follows is an illustrative sample created by paraphrasing statements made by participants on the four most frequently raised topics.

1. Race and Diversity

African American professionals: We have serious race problems in this city. We must put issues of race and class behind us and begin to focus on being human beings in a city trying to make itself better. There is clear

racial profiling by the New Orleans Police Department. We must fight the societal and institutional flaws in the city with individual action, and when we succeed, we must hold out our hands and bring others with us.

Caucasian professionals: We do not feel disrespected because all of the institutions in this city and country are set up to protect and preserve white collar privilege. We need an agreed-upon definition of racism, so that conversations may begin with everyone on the same page. There is much distrust among whites and blacks because whites have the economic power and blacks have the political power. We must ask leadership, particularly in the black community, to quit stirring the pot because it is not a good idea for people to consider themselves victims who have no control of what is happening to them. Blacks in New Orleans, as compared to other cities, are overly dependent on the system.

Members of other cultural and religious groups: We want to live in a diverse atmosphere, so we choose to make the leap of faith in believing that diversity is going to work. This city is sick—there is a serious black-versus-white problem. We need to find a way to close the divide. Fear of change is rooted in misunderstanding, and allowing everyone a chance to participate in public decision-making will ensure each voice is heard and understood. Governing over diversity is the challenge; respecting diverse voices is the solution.

2. Facing and Embracing Our Differences

African American activists and organizers: Black culture is being commercialized and degraded. We must educate our children and other citizens about African American cultural traditions, like second lining at funerals.⁶⁹

Members of religious traditions: In New Orleans it is difficult not being affiliated with a Christian religion; there are times when non-Christians are very misperceived. If we don't solve this issue of trusting, understanding, and respecting each other, then the rest doesn't really matter. One of the

challenges we are facing here in New Orleans, as well as around the country, is the problem of the African American male, an endangered species.

Members of the Vietnamese community: When we are in front of a group that might not be our ethnicity, especially in situations where we have to constantly stand up and ask for our rights, there is a feeling of being excluded. Asians have this stereotype of being very hardworking and intelligent, and because of it, we are not lacking in the area of respect. Look at us with respect for our gifts, our talents, and what we can contribute to this community. We need to address the myth that Vietnamese do not pay taxes; we are paying as much in taxes as you are. There is so much need in this community for unity, not for divisiveness, and we think that things like interfaith dialogues are one way to make that happen.

Members of the German and Greek communities: New Orleans is a wonderful cultural melting pot; it has so much to offer. These sessions mean so much because the cultural diversity of this city is wonderfully valuable, and we do not want to lose any of it. The Germans and Greeks have been tremendous contributors to the economic success of New Orleans. We love this city, as is very evident in our festivals and our participation in everything that goes on here.

Members of the Hispanic community: It is important to understand step-by-step what is going on in the Hispanic community. We have the right and the obligation to make sure that the working people's needs are being met and to make sure their families' and their children's needs are being met. Simultaneous translation at public events like these sessions is very important. Education is the most important thing in this country, not just for ourselves, but for Americans who think that this country should not include new cultures. Americans need to learn what their own culture is about and they need to learn about other cultures.

Members of the Arab American community: There is a nationwide negative stereotype of Arab Americans, and this has affected the self-image

of the Arab-American children here. Our teachers need to be more aware of the teasing and harassment that occurs with immigrant children, and they need to educate others about our holidays. First-generation Arab-American children in the United States are losing their culture because they want to become Americanized to feel included. It is important for us to continue to keep our heritage alive, and that can only be done through acceptance.

Members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community: We would say that New Orleans—gay, straight, black, white—was the most accepting city of diversity, and it is something we have all worked really hard at. Now we need to renew that drive for inclusivity post-Katrina. Some newly relocated New Orleanians are not as accepting of homosexuality. Reeducation and reclaiming the safety of the gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual community is crucial now that this is a city committed to acceptance of all people. As a city, we should embrace the wonderful thread that each community represents in the fabric of New Orleans.

3. The Criminal Justice Problem

African American professionals: Crime is the real killer, no matter what race or socioeconomic class we are in. When we divide ourselves into race and class, we ignore the greater problem that the criminal justice system is broken. Black-on-black crime is not treated as seriously as black-on-white crime or crime against an outsider, such as a tourist. Our disregard of this issue has failed our kids. Almost 95 percent of those in juvenile court are African American youth. We have to look at the causes and effects of poverty on criminal activity and come up with a solution. We can only achieve equality by fighting the inequality in black and white education, poverty, and ultimately, reducing crime across the board.

Caucasian professionals: There is tremendous fear of black youth because of the crime wave. Black-on-black crime is not treated the same as black-on-white crime.

The Vietnamese community: We felt the most excluded, the most alone, when we had to go to city hall to testify or file a complaint against the police. The police have taken a long time to respond to the Vietnamese community on issues of violence and murder. We feel excluded when we request police protection, and the City does not listen to us because of our ethnicity. I hope that after these sessions, the City will put forward a greater effort to protect our community against crime and violence.

African American activists and organizers: People being held for 120 days without being charged is unacceptable. White representation at rallies for police protection of the black community is not as strong as white representation at rallies for white protection. Our youth feel that the police department is harassing them.

Residents of public housing: There are certain sections of the city where the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) does not have respect for the tenants or residents. Racial profiling and random stops are subjecting those of lower economic status to harassment. If there are no repercussions for this harassment, there is no respect for the police.

Members of the Hispanic community: There are no Hispanic services available when people call 911. Latinos and undocumented workers are more vulnerable to crime merely because they cannot communicate and do not understand the legal system. Since the hurricane, the police have developed an adversarial approach with members of the Latino community, who do not trust law enforcement now. Confusion over immigration increases distrust; immigration is not a criminal matter, but rather a civil violation. If a crime occurs, Latinos will not go to the police because they are justifiably afraid that the police will not help with immediate problems, but will instead deport them.

Members of the Arab American community: The police need to provide sensitivity training to those in public service positions in order to be aware of the unique needs of the Muslim community.

4. The Education Crisis

African American professionals: Over 60 percent of young black men who enter the public school system in Orleans Parish drop out before graduation, and many end up as clients in the prison industrial complex. We need programs for at-risk kids to help those children who have no criminal record and want to make the most of their education. If we can teach these kids the value of human life, maybe they will begin to see value and potential in their own lives. Cultural competency must be a core component of a new post-Katrina educational system.

Caucasian professionals: The most positive consequence of Katrina is that it has given us a chance to rebuild a failed school system. Whether students are underprivileged or rich, we need a school system that works.

Members of the Italian, French, and Irish cultural groups: Education is essential in our communities. The school board needs to address our cultural history and keep it alive for the younger generation. We would like to see some tangible ways that we can continue this dialogue. We would like for the schools to emphasize the history of the struggles, victories, and beautiful contributions of each cultural group.

African American activists and organizers: The school system is very, very racist. Black culture is not represented in our school board. Teachers do not seem to care about education for black students.

Members of the Hispanic community: Schools are not easily accessible to Hispanic children. Parents are not informed of what paperwork is needed for enrollment or where to go to obtain necessary documentation, like social security cards. The English as a Second Language (ESL) program in Orleans Parish has always been in shambles; in comparison, Jefferson Parish has an incredible ESL program that is more responsive to its ethnic citizenry. New Orleans should strive to follow this example. Furthering literacy and adult education for Hispanics is important, but there is no money for it.

Members of the Arab American community: Many of the immigrants who come to the University of New Orleans have poor writing skills. More attention must be paid to teaching writing and standard English skills.

B. From Listening to Action

After reviewing the transcripts of the listening sessions described above, members of the HRC made twelve specific recommendations to key decision makers in the public and private sectors. These recommendations were aimed at advancing respectful awareness and fuller inclusions of all social and cultural groups in New Orleans.⁷⁰ The twelve recommendations were as follows:

1. That the city administration and the appropriate committee of the city council consider the appointment of a task force to study, make recommendations, and keep the council informed about the situation of vulnerable, newly arrived workers from Hispanic and other cultures in post-Katrina New Orleans.
2. That the inspector general of the City of New Orleans review the awarding of contracts to minority- and women-owned companies during the post-Katrina rebuilding period to assure that they are offered in sufficient numbers and through an appropriate public bidding process designed to select qualified companies and achieve the goals of building minority business equity, strength, and competence.
3. That the mayor and city council continue their vigilance regarding the availability of affordable housing coupled with social, educational, and new economic opportunities for New Orleanians displaced by Katrina who wish to return home.
4. That the inspector general of the City of New Orleans assure that the concerns expressed in this report about the state of relationships between the New Orleans Police Department and the African American, Vietnamese, Hispanic, Asian, and Arab American communities be shared in a timely

manner with the independent monitor of NOPD public integrity to be established in 2008 under the supervision of the inspector general.

5. That the New Orleans Police Department superintendent meet or continue to meet with leaders of the Asian, Hispanic, Arab, African American, Vietnamese, and gay and lesbian communities to identify recurring problems in the interaction between the police and members of those communities, including those mentioned specifically by citizens who took part in the HRC listening session; and that the NOPD superintendent works with these groups to jointly formulate and implement possible solutions.

6. That within sixty days of receipt of this report, the city administration commission a working group to make recommendations, as soon as possible but no later than July 1, 2008, on the creation and funding of a mobile team of translators to address the concerns of the Vietnamese and Hispanic communities regarding interactions between members of their communities and city agencies, including the police department. The Hispanic and Vietnamese representatives of the HRC, or their designees, should be included as members of the working group, along with representatives of the administration and city council.

7. That the city council immediately implement an interfaith rotation of prayers by leaders from the different religious communities that make up the city to open council meetings, and that at one of its meetings each month the New Orleans City Council recognize, by proclamation or some other appropriate measure, the presence and contribution to New Orleans of one of the groups identified in this report and others.

8. That within sixty days of receiving this report, the mayor and city council members attend a briefing by the HRC on the critical role of elected public officials in promoting a climate of respect for all groups in the city. This briefing should also be attended by future mayors and council members prior to taking office.

9. That within ninety days of this report, HRC representatives meet with the public and media relations staff of the city, Convention and Visitors Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, and other public and private bodies to review and consider enhancements in the strategy for highlighting the diversity of New Orleans in efforts to attract visitors, business investments, and new as well as returning residents to the city.

10. That during 2008, the HRC initiate meetings with the board presidents and chief executive officers of the various entities governing public and private schools in New Orleans to review the comments on the experience of children from minority cultures, and to encourage them to assess whether the climate and curriculum of their schools foster appreciation of and respect for students, parents, and staff of all cultural groups.

11. That during 2008, the HRC initiate meetings with the superintendents of the Recovery School District and Orleans Parish Schools to review and consider possible enhancements to accessibility of information about school choice and enrollment procedures for parents of minority students.

12. That ninety days in advance of the November 2008 elections, the HRC convene a working group to include the League of Women Voters, the Urban League, the National Council of Jewish Women, Common Good, and other citizens organizations that sponsor campaign forums for the purpose of promoting political campaigns in the city of New Orleans that are civil and not racially polarized.

VI. POSTSCRIPT: A UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO THE REBUILDING OF NEW ORLEANS

In the years since Katrina, elected and appointed officials, business people, and civic and neighborhood leaders have gathered publicly to address every matter affecting survival and quality of life in New Orleans, from levee protection to neighborhood development. The HRC listening

sessions reported here were unique among post-Katrina conversations because they focused not on how to solve a particular problem, but rather on the differences we bring to all such conversations and how those differences can be embraced constructively, thereby becoming a source of strength rather than division. This series of public dialogues was not focused on any specific part of the rebuilding of New Orleans, but rather on the whole—the texture of relationships constituting the social fabric of a city embodying the diversity of America.

This effort began, but did not end, with plain talk and efforts to understand. Having identified specific concerns of the various groups that took part in the conversations, the executive director and members of the HRC fashioned specific recommendations aimed at addressing concerns raised by citizens and delivered them to local public and private decision-makers. As of this writing, nine of the twelve recommendations have been implemented in cooperation with the New Orleans City Council and the Office of the Mayor. The three remaining (numbers nine through eleven) are in process and are scheduled for completion by December 31, 2008, at which point a final report will be made to the mayor, the city council, and the public.⁷¹

¹ Michael A. Cowan is the chair of the Human Relations Commission and executive director of Common Good, a network of New Orleans civil-society organizations building consensus on the rebuilding of the city.

² Hazel S. Parker, an educational consultant, was the principal researcher for the Human Relations Commission on this project.

³ Michael A. Cowan, Letter to the Editor, *Panel Brings Diverse New Orleanians Together*, TIMES-PICAYUNE, Feb. 6, 2007 (on file with the author).

⁴ Protected classes include race, religion, nationality, gender, age, sexual identity and orientation, and disability. CITY OF NEW ORLEANS HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION, WE BELIEVE IN ONE NEW ORLEANS: REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS 3 (2008), <http://www.cityofno.com/Portals/Portal58/Resources/human%20relations%20commission.pdf> [hereinafter City of New Orleans]. The participating HRC members were Martin Gutierrez, Aqeel Salaam, Michie Bissel, Francis King, Hana Safah, Jane Parker, Craig Stewart, Russell Carll, Margaret Montgomery-Richard, Dottie Reese, Gay Fulton, Walter

Baer, Therese Badon, Vinh Tran, Michael Cowan, Andre Perry, and Executive Director Larry Bagneris.

⁵ Transcript of Public Hearing on Death of Levon Jones Before the Human Relations Commission, (2005).

⁶ See NED SUBLETTE, *THE WORLD THAT MADE NEW ORLEANS* 4 (Lawrence Hill Books) (2008).

⁷ See CREOLE NEW ORLEANS: RACE AND AMERICANIZATION (Arnold R. Hirsch & Joseph Logsdon eds., 1992).

⁸ SUBLETTE, *supra* note 6, at 19–28.

⁹ CREOLE NEW ORLEANS: RACE AND AMERICANIZATION *supra* note 7, at 11.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Jerah Johnson, *Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth-Century French Ethos*, in CREOLE NEW ORLEANS: RACE AND AMERICANIZATION 30 (Arnold R. Hirsch & Joseph Logsdon eds., 1992).

¹³ SUBLETTE, *supra* note 6, at 92–91.

¹⁴ H. G. LONGFELLOW, *EVANGELINE* (Mina Lewiton ed., Duell, Sloan & Pearce 1966).

¹⁵ Johnson, *supra* note 12, at 33–34.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.* at 39.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 36–37.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 39–40.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ SUBLETTE, *supra* note 6, at 293–311.

²² Johnson, *supra* note 12, at 41–42.

²³ *Id.* at 42–43.

²⁴ *Id.* at 41–42.

²⁵ *Id.* at 43.

²⁶ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture*, in CREOLE NEW ORLEANS: RACE AND AMERICANIZATION 58 (Arnold R. Hirsch & Joseph Logsdon eds., 1992).

²⁷ Hall, *supra* note 26, at 59–60.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.* at 85.

³¹ *Id.* at 86.

³² *Introduction to Part II: The American Challenge*, in CREOLE NEW ORLEANS: RACE AND AMERICANIZATION 91–119 (Arnold R. Hirsch & Joseph Logsdon eds., 1992) [hereinafter *Introduction to Part II*].

³³ *Introduction to Part II*, *supra* note 31, at 91–92.

³⁴ *Id.* at 98–99.

³⁵ *Id.* at 105.

³⁶ JOSEPH LOGSDON, *IMMIGRATION THROUGH THE PORT OF NEW ORLEANS FORGOTTEN DORRS: THE OTHER PORTS OF ENTRY TO THE UNITED STATES* 114 (M. Stolarik ed., 1988).

- ³⁷ ANTHONY J. STANONIS, *CREATING THE BIG EASY* 243–44 (University of Georgia Press, 2006).
- ³⁸ See KIM LACY ROGERS, *RIGHTEOUS LIVES: NARRATIVES OF THE NEW ORLEANS CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT* 17–76 (1993).
- ³⁹ *Id.* at 69.
- ⁴⁰ ROGERS, *supra* note 38, at 105–109.
- ⁴¹ *Id.* at 155–57.
- ⁴² *Id.* at 9–11.
- ⁴³ JED HORNE, *BREACH OF FAITH*, 91 (2006).
- ⁴⁴ *Man Dies After Fight With Nightclub Bouncers*, *TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans), Jan. 1, 2005; *Boy, 16, Killed After Police Chase*, *TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans) May 31, 2005.
- ⁴⁵ *School Board Sessions Out of Order; Outspoken Critics Disrupt Meetings*, *TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans), Nov. 16, 2001.
- ⁴⁶ *Bourbon Street Bar Bias Detailed*, *TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans), May 17, 2005.
- ⁴⁷ *White Man in Black Skin : Blessings and Condemnations*, *TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans), M 28, 2004.
- ⁴⁸ *Fired White Workers Are Awarded \$1.9 Million*, *TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans), Mar. 31, 2005.
- ⁴⁹ *Mardi Gras Indian Meet Turns Nasty*, *TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans), Mar. 22, 2005.
- ⁵⁰ *Thieves Again Target Elderly, Bejeweled Women, Lee Says*, *TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans), Feb. 19, 2005.
- ⁵¹ HORNE, *supra* note 43, at 44–45.
- ⁵² Michel Krupa, *Katrina Upends City's Racial Politics*, *THE TIMES-PICAYUNE* (New Orleans), Oct. 19, 2008 at A-1, available at <http://www.nola.com/timespic/stories/index.ssf?/base/library-157/1224396223219780.xml&coll=1>.
- ⁵³ W.H. Frey et al., *Resettling New Orleans*, The Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program (Sep. 12, 2007), available at <http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2007/07katrinafreysinger.aspx> at 13.
- ⁵⁴ *Id.* at 13.
- ⁵⁵ *Id.* at 7.
- ⁵⁶ *Id.* at 7.
- ⁵⁷ *Id.* at 10.
- ⁵⁸ *Id.* at 11–12.
- ⁵⁹ Bill Quigley, *Half of New Orleans's Poor Permanently Displaced* (March 6, 2008), available at <http://www.truthout.org/article/bill-quigley-half-new-orleans-poor-permanently-displaced-failure-or-success>.
- ⁶⁰ See EDWARD T. CHAMBERS WITH MICHAEL A. COWAN, *ROOTS FOR RADICALS: ORGANIZING FOR POWER, ACTION, AND JUSTICE* (2003).
- ⁶¹ La. Dep't of Education, *2003-2004 District Composite Reports*, available at <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/education.html>.
- ⁶² Cowen Institute, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*, *New Orleans*, Tulane University (2008), available at <http://education.tulane.edu/stateofnola.pdf>.

⁶³ *Id.* at 44–49.

⁶⁴ City of New Orleans, *supra* note 4.

⁶⁵ The four topics raised most frequently by participants were race and diversity, understanding different others, crime and the criminal justice system, and education. Nine additional topics were raised frequently by participants were economic opportunity, merit selection of political leaders, social involvement, city government, working conditions of immigrants, portrayal of New Orleans in the media, housing promoting self-sufficiency, and health. City of New Orleans *supra*, note 4, at 3.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 60, 64.

⁶⁹ SUBLETTE *supra*, note 6, at 281.

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 618–20.

⁷¹ Human Relations Commission, Minutes (Sept. 11, 2008) (on file with author).