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Hurricanes, Alligators, and the Fight for Justice

Notes from a Trip to the US South

Eugene Romania

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September 25, 2007

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- One Mic: One “microphone.” So that everyone can hear and be heard, only one speaker at a time.

In my opinion, just cultivating and teaching these values in groups of adults everywhere is a noble task in and of itself, even if the organization had no impact on the criminal justice system — which is clearly not the case. From what I’ve seen here, people in this organization have for the most part been drawn to it through their “hearts” and “stomachs” like Lil’ Pete put it, and the “heads” are radically transformed in the process...

So, what is to be done:

Nothing too radical to add here, just confirmation of what we’ve already sort of figured out. In my time, I’ve seen revolutionaries spend a lot of time starting organizations and study groups, some more successful than others. But a more fruitful avenue in this time, I believe, is to humbly seek out fledgling or growing organizations like FFLIC which seem to be leading the struggle in areas we deem strategic and to humbly offer our individual talents to these organizations. It’s definitely a cliché, but we need to do so not to lead, but to follow and “serve the people” and yes, record and think, but trust that the collectively determined destination is worth getting to. The struggle will continue with or without us anyhow, and we can always take our toys and go home and silently be oppressed if we don’t like the way the ship is sailing, or go get on some other ship — that’s what everyone else in the world does and there is nothing wrong with doing that in a principled manner. (And of course we can’t change the direction of the wind in any case!)

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learn from you. Let's be open to listening and sharing with each other.

- Oppression Exists — We Fight Against It Here: Since we all live in a world where racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and homophobia exist, it also exists within our group. As an organization fighting the injustices and oppression of the juvenile justice system, we must also actively confront and challenge oppression in all forms wherever it exists — especially amongst ourselves.
- Use the “WHOA”: We all learn together. If there is anything that doesn't quite make sense, or if we're moving too fast, just say “WHOA”. We'll back up and explain/slow down/whatever so that we can all move forward as a group.
- Step up / step back: If you are someone who feels comfortable speaking in groups and making comments, we ask that you “step back” and make room for others to do the same. If you're not so comfortable speaking out, we invite you to “step up” and share your ideas with us in this supportive group setting.
- This is a Place for Solidarity: We are all here because we believe in fighting for justice, though we have many differences. We cannot let those differences be used to “divide and conquer.” We are much stronger as a whole.
- Be Aware of Time: There is always lots to talk about and get done whenever we come together. Let's all be aware of time and try to monitor ourselves so that we can be sure to cover everything. If there are issues that come up that we don't have time to talk about, we can always put it in the “Parking Lot” to talk about later.

is useful to the people who are in that network. In this case: how the bureaucracies work, what services are available, how to stand up to the system as individuals and as groups to fight for change. I guess the term I would use is “cultivating organic expertise.” If you have a kid in risk of going to prison or already there, somewhere in that 900 people there will be knowledge you need to help your child, knowledge that it is not in capital or the state’s interest to provide. And when you mobilize the energies of those 900 people, you can get changes made. Because the combined knowledge and experiences of 900 people = a smart and strong collective force capable of earning some allies in high places, a voice, and a seat at the table. Not so explicitly revolutionary, but it’s something good for people where before there was nothing good before.

People in this organization say that it is as much about changing people as it is about changing policy or helping individuals. A lot of time is spent on inter-group dynamics, probably necessary in building a multi-racial, multi-class organization such as this one. Parents start off new to the organization and get help, then stay involved, become active members, start returning help to new parents, and some emerge as leaders that recruit others to the organization and take on larger organizational roles. The organization is governed by 8 guidelines — read out loud one by one by different folks at the beginning of the monthly chapter meetings, both to keep them at the front of everyone’s minds but also to not suppose that everyone present can read at the same level. They are:

- Respect for Everyone: We all come from different experiences and walks of life. We all have our areas of knowledge and unawareness. For meaningful work to be done in this group, we need to respect the strengths and weaknesses of all.
- Open Minds Only: You never know what you might learn from someone else’s experience or what someone could

Eugene Romania is an Oregonian who has been a member of Bring the Ruckus for three years with the Portland local, where he has been involved in police-abolition work. With the support of the organization, he was able to spend nearly a month living in Lake Charles, Louisiana volunteering with Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC). These notes are excerpted from his online travel diary, which he used to communicate with other Bring the Ruckus members during the month of June.

May 31, 2007, 8:31 PM

The city of Lake Charles is beautiful, and the first two white person’s conversations I overheard involved one recounting how she told both her bosses to “go straight to hell” today and the other saying how he hated Arkansas because Bill Clinton is from there — in his opinion Clinton should have died at birth, is a child molester, and took all his hard earned money to give to black people who are too lazy to go to work, so they just wake up at 11 am everyday, and in his opinion, if every African died tomorrow, he wouldn’t care. This will be an interesting time...

– E. (from the shores of Lake Charles, LA: “Welcome to Lake Charles — Come See Our Live Gators”)

June 1, 2007, 8:30 AM

“God Answers Knee-Mail”

Today is the first day of the 2007 Atlantic Hurricane Season. No ceremonial first pitch or parade, but I received my hurricane-planning guide inside the daily paper, and I intend to become familiar with it.

Forecasters are expecting 17 named storms this year and 9 hurricanes, 5 of them “intense.” “We expect an above-average hurricane

season,” says the paper. An average year in the Gulf has only 9.6 named storms and 2.3 intense hurricanes, so this year is expected to be twice as hurricane-ridden as normal.

It is clear to the casual observer (me) that this city hasn't come close to recovering from Rita, two years ago. It came up approximately 15 seconds into my first conversation with a local, who was telling me what casinos I should check out. “Harrah's was the biggest, it was right over thurr...before the big storm,” the man said, as he pointed out over the lake. There are plenty of abandoned buildings scattered all over town, still two-thirds standing and advertising a \$4 crawfish buffet or used cars, which are nowhere in sight.

More than that, it seems like about a quarter of businesses are shuttered, many closing in just the past few months. Bars and restaurants look empty. According to the paper, about 10% of people between the ages of 18 and 40 left after “the big storm” and evidently are not returning, and the same goes for a larger proportion of children and teens. The number of people over 55 is growing, however, and that has demographers worried about the economy. Well, at least people can look forward to a proposed \$100 million “National Hurricane Museum and Science Center” that will open in the parish someday....Thanks, Federal government and corporate donors.

A few random observations about things:

- Last night, I slept next to a bayou. (On a bayou? In? What's the right preposition here?) It was the first one I have ever experienced. If you've seen *The Empire Strikes Back*, it looks exactly like the Dagobah System. I've always been an Endor guy myself, but it was still pretty sweet. Though I didn't see Yoda, I did see turtles, very strange-looking giant ducks, a raccoon-like creature, and deer. I didn't get attacked by a cottonmouth, which I'm thankful for.

can't avoid that in places in the shadow of The Spot either... but it's not as bad.

So even if it was mostly fate that sent me to Lake Charles, I think I was more comfortable and more effective there than I would have been in New Orleans. It seems to me that there are a lot of idiots out there right now, and that has the non-idiots are in a defensive posture. Lake Charles, on the other hand, was warm and welcoming, ridiculously so. I asked one local's opinion on outsiders coming to their city. He thought for a moment and said, “It's fine as long as you don't bring any more mosquitos.” You can say hello to a stranger here and end up talking for 30 minutes and end up on the topic of philosophy, culture or relationships. Didn't see that much in NOLA. Like other underdog cities, the locals, once they get over their confusion about why you would enjoy their city, seem excited to tell you about what is so enjoyable about it. And once you win the trust of one or two key individuals, you are a full part of the community as long as you want to stay there.

That, to me, is wonderful, and how things work where I'm from, so that's a good thing. Maybe because Rita was the storm that the nation forgot, it was “a blessing” to come and do work in this city and in a tiny way contribute to its recovery and help let people know here that outsiders gave at least a little bit of a fuck. And there was plenty to do! I didn't meet very many ‘activists’ at all in my time here despite being involved. For me, it was fairly amazing to find an organization of 900 people where those skills were really needed and in short supply — how to make a flyer or facilitate a meeting, for example.

But these people are gifted organizers and I learned a LOT about how people build organizations around here. And it's not different from what I intellectually knew from what little I've heard about “organizing,” but it really is not only about fliers and conferences and benefit shows and holding meetings. It's about building a formal network of people who are struggling for concrete aims. This network is built by talking — and sharing concrete information that

Here is a picture of a sidewalk mural that was done by a young person downtown. It's really, really nicely done (and cute), and it's got a nice message about respecting people's culture — another one of those wise sayings that people down here love so much. It is a picture of a kangaroo eating a bowl of gumbo with an alligator in a bayou. They are both having a good time. The text says: "The best guest is the one who makes his host feel right at home"... (I know, it's a female kangaroo, but whatever...)

June 19, 2007, 10:16 AM

More reflections, from my last week on the bayou:

In life, it's been some combination of fate and choice that I've always been drawn to places that are not The Spot. Places that are significant, but probably less so than The Spot. That have contributions and impacts to make, but more subtle than those of The Spot. It may be hereditary — My dad's side of the family emigrated to the East Bay, not San Francisco. And the Bay Area, not LA. When I was a teenager, the city I was influenced by wasn't so much Seattle, whose style and music the world was obsessed with, but Portland whose culture lay outside the spotlight despite its role in shaping the regional grunge sound. The places where I go or end up never get the "special issue," they always get the sidebar.

I've always preferred the milder underdog places to The Spot anyway. Geneva rather than Zürich. Marseilles over Monaco. Brussels and Rotterdam over Amsterdam. Bratislava over Prague. New Jersey rather than NYC. Cape Town over Johannesburg. I guess I'm just that kind of person now, and it's too late to change. One thing about the places that are The Spot is that idiots and the market always charge in and ruin what was so great about The Spot anyway. And then The Spot is different and begins to rapidly change in capitalism's endless cycle of creative destruction. You

- It seems like (white?) people here are not super good at geography. In my first night of eavesdropping and minimal conversation, I heard one woman my age ask what "Sacramento" was, and the park ranger was totally confused when I said I was from Oregon: "Hmmm, uh, wait... no, I'm thinking of Washington — where is Oregon at?" I'm not saying they're provincial, I'm just sayin'...
- People here talk funny. I knew that before I got here, and yes, I know, I probably sound funny to them, but STILL. Luckily people talk really slow for the most part, but I had a comedic exchange with a guy outside of this "Donut King" that I am writing you from, as we tried to out-courtesy each other by ceding the right of way in the parking lot. (I was on foot, he in his car.) He was laughing and leaned out the passenger window and good-naturedly said something like: "Weltharseendaymayne good deed! Hahahaha..." I thought, "What thee hell?", so I laughed and said, "Alright!" I've quickly picked up that in the local dialect of all races, "Alright!" is one of those all-purpose greetings/responses/observations/farewells. In fact, that was the first thing someone said to me in this city. A guy who I parked next to by the Lake boardwalk, nodded to me and said "Alright." I was confused, but now I see that he meant "Good evening." In fact, over 50% of the conversations either end or begin with "alright," so it seems like a safe thing to say when you don't know what the hell people are talking about.

OK, enough for now. I'm off to research housing and meet with Grace, the Lake Charles director of FFLIC. Alright.

June 1, 2007, 5:55 PM

"Hello — this is God. I will be handling all your problems today. I will not need your help. Thanks, and have a nice day." — sign displayed in a convenience store in Cameron Parish

I found housing. It's nice. The price is right. I mean the price is the best. It didn't cost FFLIC anything. It will probably work for anyone else that comes down here. I'm happy.

June 2, 2007, 11:34 AM

"R.I.O.T. Revival In Our Town job fair — June 9- 12" — signs posted all over Lake Charles (irony apparently unintentional)

Man, I'm so relaxed today. Nothing to fret over or organize for the first time in weeks. I've spent the first part of the day walking around downtown and along the lakefront. I wish I knew what downtown was like before the big storm, because there ain't SHIT cracking right now. Seriously, well over half the buildings are unoccupied. I saw ONE person walking around in 1.5 hours, not counting a few joggers. Not many cars either, and the ones that were there seemed to just be passing through. Development and businesses along the highways through town seem to be doing pretty well, though, and every few blocks there is a building being renovated/repared or new construction, although there are still quite a few storm-damaged and vacant buildings as well.

Yesterday, after talking with Grace and while my housing sitch was being worked out, on Grace's recommendation, I drove a loop down through the rural parish south of here where Rita made landfall, called Cameron Parish. It was seriously gorgeous, it had all been farmed for centuries but is now largely a nature reserve with towns that rely on fishing/seafood and mysterious substance drilling operations, and a l'il bit of tourism.



Saw this sign only a few minutes after pulling into town on my first night... I'll see if I can post some more pictures soon.

June 14, 2007, 4:45 PM

The Gulf Coast, and by extension the whole US, due to the effect on the economy, is in a certain way very, very lucky that Rita made landfall in such a rural place. It was easy to evacuate, and there was not so much infrastructure to begin with. And Rita, called "the storm that the nation forgot" by the local media, was the third most powerful storm on record in the US. I think it's easy to forget because the loss of life was very minimal and, well, southwestern Louisiana/Lake Charles isn't as sexy as New Orleans. And, of course, comparatively few people literally lost their lives.

As I first got down into Cameron Parish, the damage reminded me of what I'd seen in eastern Croatia after the civil war... every 5th house or so still missing a roof. Commercial signs partially obliterated. Similar to what I had seen in Lake Charles, but a l'il more intense, but more spread out due to its rural character. Then, as I drove on, I realized that every intact building I saw was a new manufactured home or trailer. For about a 20-mile square radius (I would guess, maybe more?) nothing was left... Some people had rebuilt by placing manufactured homes on reinforced pylons 10 feet off the ground and parking their cars underneath, presumably in case of storm surges. It looked like some people were going to permanently live in mobile homes on their property, so they could evacuate with all their belongings, or maybe they were just waiting for money to rebuild a proper house. Down there I saw a group of obviously Latino people (still haven't seen a single obviously Latino person in Lake Charles, which seems strange...) on their lunch break from a re/deconstruction job. There were people in huge white Halliburton pickups whizzing around, nearby some aforementioned weird "strategic drilling operation"...

To be continued...

June 2, 2007, 11:58 AM

So yeah, one main point is, if Rita had hit Galveston, or Houston... forget about it. I don't want to know what a storm like that would have done as a "direct hit" on a major city. But we will possibly find out in a little while. One thing to note about Rita is that not only was it unusual because of its size, but also because the path it took was unique. Which raises a point about warming Gulf temperatures — not only are hurricanes more intense, but they are taking historically unheard-of paths inland, so cities previously thought of as not susceptible to powerful hurricanes might be surprised by one. I'm not a climatologist, so I don't know what those cities are, or how likely it is, but I'm just sayin'.

Finally, a word about the police. This isn't a new idea, but it is frightening how the models of martial law which were imposed after the big storm could be deployed to quell "civil unrest." A thousand National Guardsmen were deployed to maintain order. The police chief was eager to prove that he could stop any looting like occurred after Katrina. Particularly chilling was this quote from the chief, a fellow named Don Dixon: "I just want to reassure people: don't worry about this place at night. You don't walk without us finding you."

Now that could be a bluff, or an accurate description of the surveillance capabilities of the police and the guardsmen; I don't know, but it's pretty creepy, and you can imagine a similar warning being given under very different circumstances.

So, I don't know for sure why Hurricane Rita was "the storm that the nation forgot," but common opinion around here seems to hold that the parishes that got damaged were inhabited by 'simple' people who never really expected anyone to care about them anyway, and were sort of used to getting the shit end of the stick and therefore used to managing for themselves. Evidently, Cajuns, Creoles, and other rural Louisianans like to be left alone to eke out a living, pleasing God before Man (sic), and to "laissez les bon temps rouler"



in power seemed so...illegitimate. And ridiculously illogical and undemocratic. This is what democracy looks like in Louisiana...

Doing this work down here is strange. Class and racial oppression is so severe and naked around these parts, that when you challenge it you can't help but feel like you are on the right side of history. I guess that is what the authors of the southern strategy had in mind. Does this lead to revolutionary possibilities? I'm still not convinced, but at the very least, participating in collective struggle here feels like it means more here, and is more personally rewarding than struggle in a city run by progressive/liberal Democrats. Illusory? Perhaps, but for me it's still too early to tell.

June 8, 2007, 1:56 PM

Nuttin' too sexy today, just teaching myself Microsoft Publisher so that I can layout FFLIC-Lake Charles' next newsletter and establish a template for future ones.

Met Grace's son this afternoon and chopped it up with him about the court/jail situation in the Parish. Soaked up a lot of info — shit is real, real fucked up, no wonder the conviction rate is over 95%! I am now officially scared to break any laws while I'm down here.

June 14, 2007, 4:17 PM

= Let the good times roll... I haven't been here nearly long enough to analyze anything differently, but I'll let you know what I come up with.

June 02, 2007, 12:28 PM

I know, all that historical and political stuff is nice, but what you really want to know is, what native swamp creatures didn't eat me today. Well, let me tell you.

Now, there is something simultaneously tragic, inspiring, and alarming about seeing a 20-lb snapping turtle crossing a highway... Of course, he sure wasn't one of those fast turtles. But he did put his legs and head in his shell when cars drove past. If I was more creative, I'm sure there would be a great social or political metaphor somewhere in there, but I'm not, so make your own if you are so inclined.

Secondly and most importantly, despite the official order posted on the city limits (COME SEE OUR LIVE GATORS), I have not yet done so. But yesterday, suddenly, I saw a huge dead gator, a victim of roadkill, and I nearly pooped my Plymouth. The bastard was nearly 6 feet long. I'm now certain that if I did see a live gator up close in an uncontrolled environment I would simultaneously lose control of my bowels, vomit, and faint. Now, that might mark me as an obvious 'not-local,' but I'm sorry, those things look like scary sea monsters.

Okay, the other thing I saw on my drive south, was the actual beach! The Cajun Riviera, if you will. VERY glamorous and exclusive, as you might well imagine. I got to touch the Gulf of Mexico for the first time. There were lots of seashells. It was hot.

There were lots of differences from the west coast beaches I'm used to. First off, the road just led to the beach and stopped. Hmmm, I thought, where is the parking lot? No parking lot, maybe the beach is off-limits? Wrongo. You are supposed to just

drive up on the beach and tear around in your car or truck and get out wherever. And people do. Also, people don't seem to have much ethos around reducing the human impact on the beach in other ways, either. Why have trash cans on the beach...when the whole beach is your trash can!?! Hooray! I mean, I saw every imaginable type of trash, some stuff that didn't even seem to belong on a beach in the first place. Most perplexing were entire bags of garbage, just sitting on the beach and tearing open and releasing their contents. Huh? Did someone bag their trash after a day at the beach and then think, "Well, that's good enough" and just leave it there? Did someone bring trash from home to leave in the middle of the beach? Seriously, what is up with that.

Alright.

June 4, 2007, 8:28 AM

[Eugene received these thoughts and questions from a fellow BTR member. His response follows.]

It seems obvious to me — as you mentioned — that Rita is the storm that everyone forgot because it didn't hit a major city. Hell, the eye of Katrina didn't hit NOLA, it hit a town in Mississippi. I am not convinced that if those levees broke in a poor black rural area — even if there was the same loss of life — that people would have given it this amount of attention; the destruction of the Indian reservations and areas like Cameron Parish and Lake Charles seems to be evidence of that.

I am getting the sense that the city was fairly successfully evacuated for Rita — is that accurate? Are folks just not returning to the City because they have no means to do so, or because they are storm shy — or is there simply nothing to return to? You mentioned the Halliburton trucks and the clean up of Cameron Parish — is that the only place in your area that is being focused on in terms of cleanup right now? Is that because they already tackled some of

There was myself, the sketchy but polite white dude from the Pac-NW; Mr. Deke, an elderly but spry wisecracking ex-Panther from Chocolate City who runs a pro-struggle black culture summer camp; Miss Nancy, a gregarious southern diva with perfect hair, accessories and makeup, and the overwhelming special power of being able to charm rich white men; and Miss Evonne, a wry, sarcastic and sturdy self-described "country" black woman.

Surprisingly, our rapport is relaxed, easy, and comical. We are a team, united by good personalities and politics, despite the occasional blunder by Miss Nancy, such as when she exclaimed that it was "disgusting!" when she learned that Mr. Zeke didn't need to brush his grey dreadlocks. But her self-deprecating humor and quick apologies seem to defuse any tension, judged by the eye-rolls and smiles of our black comrades.

The capitol reeks of corruption. Pink-faced men in white suits, younger men with perfectly groomed hair. Back-slaps. Knowing winks and nods. Miss Nancy and Miss Evonne bend the ears of every slimy legislator they can find, and a few earnest democrats as well, including one who exclaims, "Oh yeah, I'm for juvenile justice!" Mr. Zeke and I, uncomfortable in the marble halls of corruption, keep a watchful eye on the proceedings and exchange smart-ass remarks and stories from the struggle for hours. (Mr. Zeke, among countless other exploits, has shot a cop directly in the ass during the early '70s when they were raiding his apartment at 4 am and then proceeded to negotiate a deal during a 3-hour stand-off, and was not charged with a crime. I have a new hero.)

We eat lunch at the capitol cafeteria where we are served by convicts. (Mr Zeke gets a hearty laugh out of them when he tells them "Come on guys, I got a bus out back, ready to go?")

Miss Nancy and Miss Evonne work the halls again in the afternoon. Mr. Zeke and I get hassled by some cops, but the result is only more laughter on the way home. Somehow this unlikely motley crew of folks gets along perfectly. The bill will probably go down to defeat, but it didn't feel like we were losing, because those

talization plan designed explicitly to draw rich whites back to the city to live in new condominiums. By closing the school, they are free to open up “magnet academies” on the property and people of means moving into downtown wouldn’t have to send their kids to Lake Charles-Boston...

So with these political forces at work, the deck was stacked. Despite over 1 hour of testimony and counterproposals from black members of the school board and a few white allies, and about 3 hours of passionate and angry oratory from the audience, UNANIMOUSLY in favor of keeping Lake Charles-Boston open, the board voted 9–6 to close the school. Tears. Anger. Resignment. School Board Meeting surrounded by white cops. This is what democracy looks like in Lake Charles...

June 7, 2007, 9:12 AM

Yesterday, myself and three other FFLIC members went up to the capitol in Baton Rouge to support lobbying efforts of something called the “second chance” project. We attended as individuals rather than representing FFLIC because FFLIC doesn’t do any lobbying or electoral work. The bill people were trying to support would allow 15- and 16 year-olds sentenced to life in prison without parole to have an appearance before the parole board when they turn 30 or 31. The state DA’s association is adamantly opposed. It’s important to note that many of the kids did not even directly commit a crime, but just were present when one occurred and were still charged with Murder II or a similar charge — wrong place, wrong time, wrong crowd sort of situations, and they usually didn’t have access to a defense lawyer before pleading guilty.

The four of us who drove up seemed like a cast from a rejected wacky buddy-movie sitcom pilot. Names have been changed to protect the innocent:

the other areas or are they attempting to rebuild Cameron Parish and not other places? I guess I am trying to get a sense of what the point is of the clean up and things like the job fair that you saw posted, particularly if no one is really living there anymore. What are the folks who are still living there hoping will happen? It sounds almost ghost-town like...I am sure it is not that extreme (maybe it is), but do you get the sense that there is this desire to rebuild the area from locals themselves? Or are there other hands in this? Or perhaps no one sees it profitable enough to put the energy into rebuilding?

Good questions. Let me see if I can address some of them. I think the main reason people left is that if all or many of your possessions, livestock, and home were destroyed, or you were out of work because your place of work or business was destroyed — you are pretty mobile, and apt to ‘start over’ in a place that a) has a strong job market or business environment and b) is less likely to be thwacked by a hurricane again. That’s probably why a lot of people moved away. However, over 90% of people stayed and are trying to rebuild their lives, sometimes from scratch, or near to it. This city still has a population of about 150,000 people, and is the urban center for a rural area that stretches for 50 miles in each direction, so there are plenty of people around. Plus, lots of people own property, and can’t very well abandon it, even if they wanted to.

I do get the sense that almost everybody evacuated, one not insignificant reason being that they saw what happened with Katrina a few weeks earlier. Vehicle ownership is a lot higher over here. In fact, a lot of rural families had livestock trailers or large trucks so they could save a lot of their things. I can only imagine how rough it must have been for Katrina evacuees who had to get back on the bus with nothing and uproot a 2nd time...

And yeah, Lake Charles got smacked VERY hard by the big storm, there was LOTS of wind damage and flooding. But Cameron Parish where the storm made landfall was like a moonscape...

June 4, 2007, 9:24 AM

“Man (sic) cannot change the direction of the wind, but he can adjust the sails.” – painted on the sidewalk, Kirby Street, Charpentier Historic District, Lake Charles

It seems to be a cultural phenomenon down here, either locally or regionally, that folks LOVE little phrases of wisdom like the one above. I see several a day, often written or posted in the strangest places...

June 6, 2007, 7:15 AM

Hey y’all, I don’t have time to write much right now, but I wanted to say that I met up with Grace and the rest of the FFLIC staff yesterday, and have started work! I put in close to 10 hours yesterday, including attending a very emotional and politically charged school board meeting... Today I’m headed to Baton Rouge for a mobilization in support of a bill that would grant children sentenced to life without parole an appearance before a parole board when they turn 30. In brief, FLLIC seems like an amazing organization and I’ve already learned some amazing tactics and organizational innovations that will be of interest to RCCW and BTR, and I already see at least a month’s worth of projects I can personally contribute to in a concrete manner.

June 7, 2007, 8:23 AM

Hey everyone, let me try and write a few words on the first couple of days with FFLIC that will hopefully shed some light on the scope of our activities.

On Tuesday, after getting a thorough orientation, a few of us went to the Calcasieu Parish School Board Meeting. The only item on the agenda that night was a vote on the superintendent’s deci-

sion to close a historic majority-black inner-city high school called “Lake Charles-Boston” and re-allocate the students to larger high schools around the city. I’m sure most of you are familiar with the political dynamics of this issue, as similar things have happened or been discussed in Portland, Oakland, and probably dozens of other US cities in recent years. School districts are exploring options to close “low-performing” schools whose poor standardized test scores and high level of required resources (due to the large number of “special needs” students) drags down the overall “performance” of the schools district. The usual result: these vulnerable students are shuttled to larger schools where they have no social base and tend to slip through the cracks without making a large blip on the overall district performance. Often kids from rival neighborhoods are forced to attend school together, leading to physical insecurity and low attendance. Basically, the move to close schools in poor neighborhoods helps their district look better on paper, but usually at the expense of the most vulnerable students.

So, at this meeting, there was a large black community presence – about 500 people showed up, including a constellation of black church pastors, the NAACP, and other activists – about 95% of the audience was black. The 15-member school board was about 75% white and mostly comprised of businessmen with no educational background – including the superintendent of the district who made the proposal.

FFLIC was there because one of its major projects is to mobilize parents to disrupt the ‘school to prison pipeline’ which is so very obvious in this community. Any guesses on the two largest industries in the parish? #1: education, #2: prisons. Any young person of moderate means makes the parish more money in jail than out in the modest job market – and the system is currently in place to siphon off a certain percentage of vulnerable school-leavers every year.

Another factor going into closing the schools – federal hurricane reconstruction money is set to pour into a downtown revi-