

Greatness, Greed, and Unscripted Reality

by the editors

THIS ISSUE OF THE *NONPROFIT Quarterly* focuses on nonprofits and the media. As we prepared it, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the South, then Hurricane Wilma did unfathomable damage to people and communities in South Florida. Just as flood waters washed over and engulfed homes and businesses and destroyed infrastructure, waves of media commentary washed over the country. Some of this coverage showed mainstream reporters on the scene, clearly taken aback not only by what they were seeing but also by what they were experiencing firsthand.

After a few days of confused coverage of reports (now acknowledged to be vastly overblown) of epidemic and random violence among the abandoned residents of New Orleans, reporters broke out of their usual mode of simply repeating what they were fed. First, they wondered at the absence of both the federal government and the Red Cross in areas they were able to access fairly easily and safely. Then, faced with the stark demographics of those left behind, they began a race and class analysis relative not only to the evacuation, rescue, and relief efforts, but also to the underlying conditions of the area—namely the grinding systemic poverty and the disinvestment in the levees project that left the area so unprotected.

In some ways the surfacing of this analysis was as shocking as the event itself. This race thing has not been on the agenda for public discourse in a while. Neither has poverty, though the poverty rate in the United States has increased in each of the last four years. Portions of the mainstream media began to seek out commentators who could fill in the race/class analysis frame. In an extraordinary show of unity, the major benefit concert at Lincoln Center was imbued with political commentary by black leaders. The Bush Administration attempted in several different ways to deflect this analysis, and then the president decided that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em! And on September 15, President Bush discovered poverty and its connection to race discrimination in the United States. He declared himself and his administration committed to eradicating the injustice caused by "unequal access to opportunity." An old, inadequate saw, but useful in a crunch?

Since then, of course, his own party has taken him to task for making rash promises, and he has declared that no new taxes will be levied to pay for the recovery or for the eradication of poverty effort. Operation Offset has been put in motion to find one-for-one cuts for expenditures related to Katrina. Of course, tax breaks for the rich will not be affected.

Since September, not surprisingly, there has been the usual spate of articles critical of some of the nonprofits involved in the relief efforts, most notably the Red Cross. The *New York Times* and the *New York Sun*, in particular, have taken this icon to task for everything from over-counting those that they served to raising money for services that were reimbursed by FEMA, and, finally, not passing a portion of the resources they raised in excess of that which was used along to the local organizations that would be engaged in long term rebuilding efforts.

The *Nonprofit Quarterly* will be watching and reporting on what nonprofits do in response to the relief and reconstruction needs of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In some ways, this situation will contain many of the problems we face each day in our work, only more intensified. It is an opportunity for the sector to revisit its traditional roles as (1) watchdogs, and (2) organizers of people, so that they have a chance to represent their own best interests.

There will be plenty of chances for opportunism in this situation, and unfortunately government, the corporate sector, and even some nonprofits may be among the miscreants, attracted or distracted by the flow of money. Yet all good front line nonprofits know who ultimately loses when the profiteers are left to function in the dark of public disinterest.



With this issue of the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, we are laying our cards on the table, committing ourselves to join nonprofits in the Gulf Coast region and around the nation to monitor and publicly call out bad actors in government and business—but especially among nonprofits. This holding one another to ethical standards is one part of nonprofit accountability that has been sorely lacking in the past. In fact, there is a kind of omerta that emerges that sets us all up. We want to regularize calling one another out as a hallmark of this sector.

Here's what the *Nonprofit Quarterly* is going to do: we're going to devote regular attention to how the nonprofit sector is performing in the context of the reconstruction in the wake of Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. We will highlight good practice as well as bad. This coverage is meant to ensure that the nonprofit sector lives up to the highest standards of practice in this interlude, and this includes avoiding unholy—albeit sometimes cash-rich—alliances with exorbitant costs to communities and the nonprofit sector. *NPQ* will monitor the press cov-

erage, the government reports, and what you, our readers and stakeholders, tell us about the sector's role in and response to the reconstruction. We will then report back to you on what we find that merits the attention and action of watchdogs and can act as learning moments for the rest of us.

The way the nonprofit sector responds to the reconstruction challenge of the Gulf Coast is ultimately a test of the character of our sector. The nonprofit sector should be watching. *Nonprofit Quarterly* will be.