New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 32
Issue 1 *Social Traps and Social Trust: Institutional Transformations in an American City following a Natural Disaster*

Article 17

3-21-2020

Across Racial Lines: Three Accounts of Transforming Urban Institutions after a Natural Disaster

James Carter
James Carter and Associates

Nolan Rollins
New Orleans Aviation Board

Gregory Rusovich
Metropolitan Crime Commission

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp

Part of the Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons, Emergency and Disaster Management Commons, Public Policy Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Urban Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Carter, James; Rollins, Nolan; and Rusovich, Gregory (2020) "Across Racial Lines: Three Accounts of Transforming Urban Institutions after a Natural Disaster," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 32: Iss. 1, Article 17.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol32/iss1/17

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Across Racial Lines: Three Accounts of Transforming a City after a Natural Disaster

James Carter[1] Nolan Rollins[2] and Gregory Rusovich[3]

At 1:30 p.m. on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina grazed the mostly evacuated city of New Orleans, reserving its most devastating force for coastal Mississippi, just to the east. During the next two days, the federal levees protecting the city failed in multiple places. Sixteen hundred people died in the metropolitan area. Residences and businesses in 80 percent of the city went underwater. Public officials warned residents and business owners that they might not be able to return for two to three months. The scope of devastation in certain parts of the city made ever returning questionable for many residents. Grievous failures of coordination among local, state, and federal governments exacerbated the collective misery, adding general confusion and uncertainty about the city's very future to deep personal anxieties about homes, jobs, schools, and neighborhoods.

What follows are accounts of the post-Katrina transformation of New Orleans by three of its leaders. None had met before these events but became trusted allies and later friends in the crucible of the events they describe. James Carter recounts the creation of an office of independent police monitor to address a longstanding history of racial bias and brutality. Nolan Rollins offers an account of how the governance of a major economic organization was transformed for the benefit of the whole city. And Gregory Rusovich explains the role of diverse, action-oriented coalitions in addressing a range of key issues, including criminal justice reforms and holding elected officials accountable for campaign promises.

A unique piece of the historical background to this article is that each of the authors was the key leader in the public work he describes but also active in supporting the work described and led by each of the other authors. Events brought these authors these events together; they met in the public arena. This is a story of collective leadership that built bridges across the racial divide in the rebuilding of an historic American city after a catastrophic event.

Transforming Policing

James Carter

Early in life I recognized the misery associated with inequities. As an African American male growing up in urban New Orleans, I was consciously and unconsciously aware of the adverse

[1]*James Carter was elected to the New Orleans City Council in 2006, following Hurricane Katrina. He served as chair of its criminal justice committee. He was later appointed by the mayor as criminal justice commissioner of the City of New Orleans. He is a managing partner of James Carter and Associates.*

[2]*Nolan Rollins is a former president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. He was appointed chair of the New Orleans Aviation Board.*

[3]*Gregory Rusovich served as board chair of the Business Council of New Orleans and the River Region, the New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation, the New Orleans Crime Coalition, the Board of Commissioners of the Port of New Orleans, GNO, Inc., and New Orleans and Company. He created (with Michael A. Cowan) Forward New Orleans, a citizen-driven process of holding elected officials publicly accountable for keeping their campaign promises. He is now board chair of the Metropolitan Crime Commission.*

circumstances surrounding me. The African American neighborhood where I lived flooded whenever there was very heavy rainfall, while the predominantly white neighborhood a few blocks away did not. A trash incinerator in my neighborhood bellowed out unpleasant odors, and, while I was off in college, a train leaked toxic chemicals and burst into flames on railroad tracks close to my parents' home.

At the same time that I was experiencing challenges laced with issues of race and class, I was blessed with a strong and principled upbringing. My father, James Carter Sr., instilled in me the virtues of hard work, discipline and determination, and dedication. I also observed him develop strong cross-racial relationships. My mother, Mildred Carter, brilliantly orchestrated my positive self-image, intellectualism, and resistance to oppression. Both of my parents exhibited kindness to the elderly, generosity to the less fortunate, and remarkable self-determination. Moreover, they fought against injustice in their own ways. Like Oprah Winfrey, I was taught "excellence is the best deterrent to racism." Because of my parents' profound influence, all three of my siblings, like me, are college graduates who have been a tremendous source of encouragement to me in my life's journey. Another monumental figure in my formative years was my grandfather, William Thomas Sr. This spiritual giant lived to be 103 years old and was the bedrock of our family.

Though I attended predominantly African American elementary, middle, and high schools, for half day every week throughout my high school years I also attended New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts, a racially diverse artistic environment that further opened my mind and expanded my worldview. In addition to the many extraordinary black educators who taught me, there were some white teachers who touched me in profound ways along my educational journey.

African American males in New Orleans have regularly experienced an adversarial relationship with law enforcement. I, however, did not develop apprehension toward law enforcement until I was in my teenage years. Before that time, I had a completely positive attitude toward the police. I attribute that attitude to two very distinct experiences in my life: the Officer Friendly Program and my dad's friend Officer Joe. The Officer Friendly program was designed to build positive community relations by having New Orleans Police Department officers visit schools and develop a rapport with the students. The officer who was sent to our predominately African American school was always a white man. More important, he was consistently kind and personable, and I looked forward to his visits. My dad's friend, Officer Joe, was an African American man visited us when I was very young. He always wore a beautifully neat and clean police uniform. He was professional, well groomed, and in good physical condition, and he wore a big smile. Later, however, in my formative years, I began to hear stories about negative experiences between the African American community and law enforcement that caused me to develop apprehensions that live in me to this day.

Filled with a desire to fight for humanitarian causes, I was blessed with the opportunity to graduate from Howard University as a philosophy and theater student and from the Howard University School of Law. During my time in law school, I was exposed to the thinking of some of the greatest legal minds in U.S. history, including Pauline Murray, A. P. Tureaud, Spotswood Robinson, Thurgood Marshall, J. Clay Smith, Jack Olender, and many others. I firmly embraced the words of the great former dean of Howard Law, Charles Hamilton Houston, who said a "lawyer is either a social engineer or a parasite on society." Moreover, while in law school, I received life-changing support from remarkable people such as Reginald Robinson, Annette Mixon-Burkeen, and Melissa Woods-Barthelemy. I left Howard University School of Law with an understanding of the importance of mastering the Constitution and applying its time-honored principles in the court system and returned to New Orleans filled with hope that I could change the world in which

I had grown up. The timeless message that I had a responsibility to use my education to affect the world positively was simply another version of the teachings ingrained in me by my sage mentor Yolande Dillon.

Armed with a freshly minted juris doctor degree, I was given the opportunity to pursue community advocacy in 1997 when the city administration appointed me the first director of the New Orleans iteration of the nationally acclaimed United States Department of Justice "Weed and Seed" initiative. In 2001, I served as a staff trial counsel for the Orleans Indigent Defenders Program. That experience allowed me to see firsthand the very worst consequences of racial discrimination, economic deprivation, broken families, poor education, and the failure to take self-responsibility. I also developed my skills as a jury trial attorney.

After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, with the blessings of my wife, Rene, and our three-year-old son, Brice, I chose to take an active part in the rebuilding of my beloved community and city. I was elected to the first New Orleans City Council seated after the storm in 2006. The council district I served was the most diverse and eclectic in the city and included the world-famous French Quarter. From 2006 to 2010, I served as chair of the newly created Criminal Justice Committee by appointment of council president Oliver Thomas. Post-Katrina New Orleans was ripe for change, and there was a spirit of reform in the air. For the first time in the city's history, the city council enacted laws that created the Office of Inspector General (OIG). It was a historic moment in city council chambers when the ordinance passed, and it would not have passed without the support of the African American city council members. Following the establishment of the OIG, in 2007–2008, I played the lead legislative role in establishing the first independent police monitor (IPM) to fight police brutality and misconduct. Though it was my desire to create a stand-alone IPM, the politics at that time would not permit me to do so. Seeing the mighty wave of support for the OIG, I strategically used it to establish the IPM as a division of the OIG. The original impetus for creating the IPM did not come from me. In response to a history of police-brutality in New Orleans and many years prior to my efforts, great community leaders and fearlessly courageous activists worked tirelessly to create a credible layer of protection for citizens against police misconduct through an oversight body outside the police department.

I found myself entwined in what appeared to be an unwinnable dynamic. How could I get interracial support for a matter that seemed to be an exclusively African American problem? Unlike some in the black community, I had not been conditioned by my upbringing to have a total distrust for white people, though my upbringing did feed my apprehension. I was a realist, however, and initially not confident that I would get the support needed from my white colleagues on the city council to pass this important governmental safeguard into law. The city council was majority white at the time, and I was leading the legislative charge for the IPM. My predicament brought to mind the words of Atticus Finch, protagonist of the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "Real courage is when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." I did not know that I would be licked, but I felt it was a strong possibility. I began anyway, prepared to see it through.

I was ready to make an attempt to get the IPM legislation passed in the midst of personal uncertainty born, on one hand, of historically based racial assumptions and, on the other, of belief in the universal goodness of all human beings. What I found was amazing. As I did more research on the issues regarding police brutality and maltreatment to the citizens of New Orleans, I encountered some interesting and unexpected realities. Though not to the same degree as African Americans, a sizable segment of white citizens had experienced unprofessional and hostile treatment from the New Orleans Police Department. More important, a determined portion of the

white community supported the IPM simply because it was the right thing to do. These were facts that many African Americans did not generally know because the African American community had good reason to believe it was targeted by rogue elements of the New Orleans Police Department. It was as if there were a conspiracy to keep that knowledge from one part of our great city to further divide our common experiences along fictional racial lines.

A lesson revealed during the development of the New Orleans IPM was so powerful that I believe it is instructive for a broader segment of humankind. It offers a modicum of hope for a world grappling with the albatross of sometimes imaginary but often real racial divisions. I found that when one is sincere and willing to put one's best self forward to work hard in pursuit of higher ideals, similarly motivated people from various racial, gender, class, and ethnic groups will on occasion provide robust support. This is not a wishful thought or regurgitated cliché. I saw it happen while an interracial partnership was creating the IPM. Comfort is truly the enemy of progress. I stepped out of my comfort zone and hit a jackpot of multi-racial support. I ultimately received solid support from the black as well as the white council members.

After the IPM and OIG were established by city ordinance, with the former as a division of the latter, a move was made to place the OIG into the city charter and grant it a dedicated annual budget of 0.75 percent of the city's annual general fund. This was a critical juncture, because those who had worked tirelessly for the establishment of the two offices understood that unless they were protected by the charter, a future mayor or council could simply slash their funding. he city charter is its constitution; its ordinances may not contradict the charter. Amending the city charter requires a majority vote, first by the city council and then by the citizenry. Placement of the IPM within the OIG meant that it would have charter protection as well. This proposal was also well received cross racially. A multi-racial campaign led by Michael Cowan of Common Good and Norris Henderson of VOTE (Voice of the Ex-Offender) played a key role in garnering multilevel support and a strong majority vote for the charter change. Other civil society leaders, including the New Orleans Business Council, also embraced the charter proposition.

The establishment of the IPM was visionary. It was done before the most recent onslaught of media coverage of all-too-frequent officer-involved shootings of African American men. It was created in an honorable manner that did not indiscriminately vilify all police officers. A commendation section placed in the IPM was designed to recognize the vast majority of police officers who daily uphold the law to the highest possible standards. New Orleans may be the only city in the United States to have a charter-mandated OIG and IPM, with budgets protected from political interference. The formation of the IPM is not a panacea for all problems of police brutality and misconduct in New Orleans or the sickening curse of racism. But it is a sign of progress and offers hope to all citizens who, under the US Constitution, are entitled to just treatment from law enforcement. It was done with tremendous multiracial support that I received after I stepped out in the faith that the moral forces of the universe would prevail.

Recovering a Vital Public Asset for the Benefit of All

Nolan Rollins

An intractable problem that limits and damages human development requires that change makers identify it as a problem for everyone to solve and to agree that regardless of station in life or personal impact on them, they are responsible for its resolution for humanity's sake. As a collective from New Orleans, the authors have been asked to shed light on how, after one of the most devastating man-made disasters in U.S. history, a group of individuals varying in age, race, life

experience, and socioeconomics can come together to tackle the challenge of working across racial lines to rebuild a city?

While some would argue that the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina created the problems that existed when our collective began its journey, I would argue that the devastation exacerbated and brought to the surface the historically inequitable system that masked the differences between the haves and the have-nots, which generally followed racial lines. This division cut across the cultural traditions that seemingly connect the entire city in a tapestry of cultural equality. When closely observed, however, that tapestry revealed differences in quality based on resources that ran plentifully in socially and economically connected networks.

With the tapestry metaphor as a backdrop, the critical question is, How does one work in a city so highly divided by race and class to build a more inclusive environment, where the content of character, competence, and work ethic, not skin color, social network, political circles, and zip codes are the determinants for accessing the American Dream?

As a transplant to New Orleans from the similarly struggling city of Baltimore, I saw that the very basic protections for humanity during this time of tragedy must begin with those public institutions that are constitutionally required to provide equitable access to publicly controlled opportunity. Soon after I relocated to New Orleans to rebuild the Urban League of Greater New Orleans, a historic civil rights organization in a post-Katrina environment, it became clear to me that the city's major economic industry was the public sector and that I needed to focus my efforts through a civil rights lens on public economic access and accommodations. That focus would be key to fighting for everyday New Orleanians to have access to the basic necessities of life. At the core of the city's rebuilding were a few principles that had to be worked on across all past lines of separation: education, criminal justice, economic opportunity, and public sector transparency.

To show what it takes to successfully rebuild a city after a modern-day disaster, the four authors of this article have been asked to focus on a subset of our key efforts to work across racial lines to change divisions of the past into allies for a brighter future. Again, as a transplant, I found myself fortunate to be included in some of the most critical rebuilding circles throughout the city, whether it was playing a significant role in the reimagining of the New Orleans educational system so that there was high quality and access for all regardless of zip code, tackling the crime problem in New Orleans to include serving as a co-chair for the search for the police chief, and membership in critical private sector institutions such as the New Orleans Business Council working on issues that impacted the whole city. I accepted an appointment by New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu as the chair of the New Orleans Airport Authority, which was perhaps my most challenging role. My primary responsibility was to regain the public's support and trust after a long period of self-dealing and corruption by appointed officials and staff, by demanding a more transparent way of doing business and delivering a high-quality public service. Highlighting our work at the airport allows me to drive home in a very specific way how working across racial lines can achieve outcomes never imagined before.

The New Orleans International Airport is not just a transportation mechanism but also a critically impactful economic development tool for the City of New Orleans and the surrounding counties. It provides thousands of jobs, directly and indirectly through such ancillary services as taxis, hotel, and ride-sharing. What we realized was that historically, regardless of whether those who held political power were white or black, political patronage had been used as a weapon to bolster the social and exclusive networks of those in power. Furthermore, in the highly charged and racially divided city of New Orleans, the skin color of the powerful had been used as a blunt object against others. In the post-Katrina environment, where the devastation affected all, if we

were going to rebuild public institutions, it became critically important that all New Orleanians see themselves as having a voice in the solution process rather than feeling it was constructed for someone else's benefit. When the mayor asked me to chair the board of directors of the New Orleans International Airport, I made clear that, because of my other role as the president and CEO of a historic civil rights organization, I would want to ensure that economic opportunity for all would be the philosophical foundation for our rebuilding process and policy. With this agreement in hand, I determined that the primary purpose of my job was to identify all the issues and things wrong at the airport and to identify the allies I would need to make the necessary changes while also providing opportunity for all.

The New Orleans International Airport serves more than eleven million people a year. But at the time when I became chair it had more than a hundred contracts that had not been rebid and or updated in many years. It had wasted operational expenditures in a manner that had unnecessarily impacted its budget. It faced a public perception of being rife with fraud and corruption. Finally, there was no overall vision for the future of one of the most important public assets in the state of Louisiana. Against this backdrop, my job was to connect with people who looked like me and people who did not, in an effort to bring solutions after a time of great chaos and devastation. A catastrophe such as the one in New Orleans soon blurs the lines of race because almost all citizens suffer equally the pain of losing their house, their business, their school, and their roads. There is no more ideal time to work across racial lines than when disaster falls across all past lines of division. As I began to identify allies to work with me to change the reality and the perception of the airport, I insisted that those around the table acknowledge that we had a problem in New Orleans of race and class and that for New Orleans to be what it aspires to be there must be a common goal of equal access for all who are willing to work for it.

To achieve the goal of bringing along a group to which you do not belong, it is critical to find like-minded individuals who can carry a message in their communities in ways that you as a race or class outsider cannot. Thus, I sought to develop relationships with the largely white business class and the largely black political class in New Orleans and to make clear to each group how important it was for us all to work together to create a thriving airport with a mission focused on operational excellence and economic inclusion. I knew I had to make a clear argument to the white business class about the importance of economic inclusion as we began the work to rid ourselves of corruption and operational inefficiencies at the airport. White business leaders, among others, understood the imperative not only of talking about race and economics but of accepting the past with a forward-looking perspective on what a more inclusive New Orleans might look like. As we continued to develop our relationships, these leaders talked with their networks in the white community about the concept of a forward-looking perspective, and I talked with my networks in the African American community about the challenges identified by the white community. We ended up agreeing that blaming the actors of the past regardless of color was an exercise in futility but deciding how to rebuild in an inclusive manner was an imperative for the future of all. This operating protocol allowed me to make bold moves at the airport, including forging an agreement with the Inspector General's Office that provided them office space at the airport to monitor operations consistently and allowed me to advise them about how best to position the airport to be a responsive public entity. Thus we were able to develop an economic inclusion policy that insured minority business opportunity and overhauled the operations of the airport so that transparency and the elimination of deficiencies were focal points. In doing so, we restored the public's confidence in the airport's ability to represent New Orleans as its optical gateway and as a public entity that operates with integrity.

While these changes may seem only loosely connected to race, I believe that without our being honest about past exclusions based on social networks and political power, none of the transformations described here would have been possible. But for reasonable white folks and black folks in New Orleans joining together in owning the past and, more important, designing a collective future, we would never have seen the transition of a public entity well-known as a bastion of patronage politics into a place where all New Orleanians can see themselves in its success.

Holding Elected Officials Accountable for Campaign Promises

Gregory Rusovich

The devastating aftermath of Katrina left one of the world's unique cities in peril. The physical infrastructure was severely damaged, the city's capacity to deliver basic services to its people was badly flawed, and the primary political leadership stoked racial tensions and neglected basic responsibilities. This abysmal neglect by the city's political leaders sparked a robust response by civic, business, and community leaders, and some emerging reform-minded elected officials, who successfully organized a dynamic, citizen-led recovery. This group of leaders refused to accept failure and racial discord.

As the longstanding CEO of my family-owned shipping company based in New Orleans, I decided that a renewed focus on helping to save my beloved community was imperative. It was clear that success was attainable and sustainable only through the building of organized diverse coalitions. Building the coalitions was difficult but exhilarating. We were able to rally a strong multiracial group of leaders and develop a laser focus on practical solutions to urgent community needs. We had vibrant discussions about whether the coalitions needed to review, assess, and tackle the topic of racism and historic prejudices before coming together on the issue of critical community needs with a dedication to immediately improving the quality of life for the citizens of New Orleans. Rallying around a shared set of principles and solutions became a far more effective and satisfying path. I was honored to be appointed chair of the Business Council of New Orleans, which provided a major post-Katrina platform by which to bring together civic, business, and community leaders to make decisions that would positively and significantly affect the present and future of our community.

Because crime had become the most serious threat in the aftermath of Katrina, we also developed the New Orleans Crime Coalition, for which I served as founding chair. The coalition was made up of a diverse group of organizations established on a set of clear public safety requirements to demand that the streets of New Orleans become safer. The coalition, consisting of twenty leading crime-fighting business and civic organizations, focused on identifying and implementing best practices required across the entire local criminal justice system by consistently and respectfully engaging political and criminal justice officials in partnerships to address key improvements required to protect the citizenry.

The New Orleans Crime Coalition has greatly improved the collaboration among key components of the criminal justice system. For example, before and immediately after Katrina, there was very little cooperation between the New Orleans Police Department and the district attorney's office. But now, because of relentless civic efforts and the appointment of a new police chief and the election of a strong district attorney (DA), the relationship between these two key criminal justice agencies is described by their respective leaders as optimal. Before and after Katrina, by needlessly arresting thousands of minor offenders, we were taking police resources

away from efforts to focus on violent criminals. We have made tremendous strides in changing our focus to making felony arrests, and the DA's acceptance and conviction rates are the highest in decades.

I also became chair of the Forward New Orleans coalition, which consists of twenty-five of the leading civic and business organizations in the city. The coalition compiled a set of principles that include integrity, transparency, effectiveness, accountability, and fiduciary responsibility. Guided by these principles, we looked at national best practices and performance metrics and developed a set of solutions and mandates for the city's political leadership to address and fix immediately. Our mandates were included in a platform that addressed urgent quality-of-life issues—crime, blight, education, city services, infrastructure, city contracting, and economic development. Through the coalition's platform, New Orleans citizens demanded safer streets, improved education, enhanced infrastructure, integrity in contracts, and an end to rampant public corruption. A set of mandated actions was compiled for each central issue and presented in individual meetings with all mayoral and city council candidates. Each candidate was asked to sign a document indicating support for all or some of the mandates, with a promise that the coalition would publish the commitments each council member made before the election and hold those elected accountable through regular reports to the public.

Now, almost ten years later, the Forward New Orleans coalition is stronger than ever—publicly presenting a set of issue-oriented mandates to those running for local political office, seeking their public pledge to our platform, and subsequently issuing ongoing reports that objectively track whether pledges are being honored. We have just entered our third four-year cycle of extracting promises from would-be office holders and holding them accountable for their actions. This citizen-led involvement in local elections is the most sustained such effort in the three-hundred-year history of New Orleans.

These vibrant, action-oriented, diverse coalitions brought dramatic change and helped lead to a better functioning city. Their success demonstrates that results can be achieved and trust gained when citizens act together on matters of common interest and agreement. The coalitions' strategic effectiveness also demonstrated that the chances of success are far greater when groups focus on issues that affect local quality of life, matters of shared concern, rather than debating and agonizing over old wounds, which is typically counterproductive and does not lead to tangible positive results.

Even more important for me than having been a part of building a better city has been the life lessons and wonderful friendships that nourished in these coalitions. Reaching across race and class lines to others with radically different life experiences has had a great impact on my ability to listen, learn, and better appreciate others. We built trust and friendships by working together as one team to achieve our shared goal of helping our beloved community and neighbors. These friendships will last forever.

Concluding Remarks

Whenever we have told this story over the past ten years, someone inevitably asks: "Would the changes you just described have happened without Hurricane Katrina?" The short answer is no. On the day before Katrina, no civic, business, or government leader in New Orleans was imagining possibilities such as an IPM, an inspector general, a reformed airport commission, or a diverse group of citizens holding candidates for public office accountable for campaign promises. The fuller answer, like the fabric of a city three hundred years old, is more complex. It has two parts. First, Hurricane Katrina upended the status quo abruptly and without warning, creating a vacuum

that allowed possibilities for change to emerge that had not existed before the storm. The opportunities of that moment could have been used for good or ill or simply neglected. Second, that vacuum was filled mainly by civic, business, and government leaders who worked across racial lines not to replace the city that had been there but to transform it for the common good by enhancing community/police relations, reducing waste and corruption, creating a more inclusive and growing economy, and reducing racial tensions. We strove boldly for a new New Orleans, not a wishful cliché but a transformed city. Katrina made such changes possible; to realize those changes, the leaders whose accounts appear here, and many more with similar convictions, together built a bridge across racial lines in a time of profound disruption, dislocation, and suffering.

A natural disaster can create a vacuum but cannot fill it. What emerged in the City of New Orleans after Katrina would not have happened without the hurricane's violent upending of the status quo. The three stories recounted here need not have happened in that upended time and place. But they did.