

# INTRODUCTION FROM SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS

Brenda F. McGadney-Douglass, Ph.D., University of Toledo, and  
Richard Douglass, Ph.D., Eastern Michigan University



The Special Issue editors with Mrs. Hickman, visiting her property to assure herself that the contractors were “doing the job right.” She generously shared time with us to explain how the house was destroyed, and how it was being rebuilt.

This special issue of *Reflections* was born out of a chance meeting between us and colleagues following their presentation about the ongoing post Katrina/Rita struggles at the 2006 annual meeting of the Council in Social Work Education in Chicago. Primarily, their discussion focused on initial challenges for rebuilding universities in New Orleans, including the potential loss of programs, faculty, and students. Given findings from preliminary studies and evaluations, it became clear from this encounter that there was a gap in information or “lessons learned” from professional practitioners and/or helpers, which acted as a hedge against teaching others in like situations about possible pitfalls and experiences that could enhance a healthy recovery. We wanted to contribute something ourselves and decided that the best we could give was assistance in giving a voice to people who would be too busy recovering their lives and careers to spend these months writing.

Comprehensive recovery from the most violent hurricane and greatest natural disaster in U.S. history must include an understanding

of the personal impact on those on the front line, especially helpers trying to stabilize environments, after a disaster. There is a need for professional helpers, such as practitioners, social workers in academia and private practice, savvy and pragmatic leadership “on the ground,” and selfless first responders to document their roles and paths to aiding in the recovery. In this manner, they can share their authentic experiences. We were grateful when the Editorial Board of *Reflections* gave us the opportunity to facilitate giving voice to academics and volunteers, who needed to share their experiences of pain, survival, hope and resiliency as responders to Katrina and Rita.

The contributors who wrote the following narratives share their stories – often with brutal honesty – in a rich and dynamic way. We want to thank each author for his or her contribution to this special issue of *Reflections*. We know from communicating with the authors that they all experienced tremendous hardships within the first twelve months after Katrina/Rita: the deaths of spouses or parents; property loss; the decline of physical and emotional health; the displacement of family, friends, colleagues, and students; delayed personal plans. Each of these authors made personal sacrifices in addition to the losses that they experienced from the storms. Written in first person just a few months after the hurricanes devastated the Gulf Coast, these stories reflect vivid fresh memories and deal directly with issues at micro and macro levels. As we first read the submissions we were struck by how fresh and

well articulated, poignant, and sometimes funny the stories were. By reading these narratives, we believe that some readers may feel that they are actually experiencing what the authors went through. The full range of emotions – joy, anger, pain, dismay, humor, fortitude, and hope – are all here. So also are the heat, damp, stink, and isolation that all the survivors faced.

We hope that professional helpers will use these narratives as a model to examine themselves and the strengths they bring to affect a positive recovery following a natural disaster, or to minor disasters that populate our careers. We are certain that faculty and students in many disciplines will find this issue to be a textbook for how to deal with disasters, and also what responses should be avoided. Text materials in the helping professions are generally too dry and “academic” to bring out the passions of being directly involved with the helping process. These narratives will never be accused of being free of passion and human spirit.

On a personal note, this issue is very significant to both of us. For five years beginning in the late 1970’s Brenda was an Assistant Professor and Director of the Aging Studies program at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO), a school that has now lost 19 departments, including many students and tenured faculty. Many of SUNO’s programs and departments operate out of trailers and mobile classrooms today. In fact, in an adjacent former parking lot, students and some faculty are housed in FEMA trailers. Getting SUNO up and running is a matter of social justice for the thousands of New Orleanians, who are mostly African-American and low-income students, at the only place where they can pursue a degree in higher education.

Richard was a new Assistant Professor at The University of Michigan when Jennette Jennings, one of our authors, was finishing her degree. The process of calling for papers, reviewing, and providing editorial work towards this publication provided the opportunity for this thirty-year friendship to be renewed.

Our trip to New Orleans in July 2007 opened our eyes to the enormity of the recovery efforts in the region and the significance of these papers in *Reflections*. During this trip, we met with several of the authors (Rebecca Chaisson and Raymonda Dennis in New Orleans, and Jeanette Jennings in Hattiesburg, Mississippi) and spoke by phone to Michael Zakour. We want to thank them for their special insights. We’d especially like to thank Rebecca for taking us on a tour of the uptown area in New Orleans and for sharing memories of her early return to the Big Easy, which she described as: “birdless and filled with flies,” empty, quiet, brown, with the constant smell of death, decay, and mold. We visited the infamous Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans East, St. Bernard Parrish, Metairie, and the Garden District to see for ourselves before we put our own words on this disaster into print. In addition to experiencing the historic hospitality and food of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, we saw communities in various stages of recovery. We were also witnesses to hope and resurrection with the Black middle-class migration from the Lower Ninth Ward to higher ground in New Orleans East; rebuilding in uptown communities. We were also saddened to see devastated neighborhoods that have been slower-to-recover.

We also want to thank and acknowledge the support of colleagues in the completion of this project. One displaced, thirty-five year Ninth Ward resident, Ms. Jerlene Bridges, helped make our immersion into New Orleans possible. Jerlene is a long time friend and social worker at the New Orleans Council on Aging. Pat Hogue, Ph.D., Chair Physician Assistant Program, University of Toledo, encouraged this trip to give validation to our editorial work. And Marie Webber, who delayed her graduate education to volunteer with the Red Cross, provided tutoring and personal interpretation of her experiences both to Richard and his students. We will be forever grateful to Jillian Jimenez, the editorial staff, and the Editorial Board of *Reflections* for giving us this remarkable opportunity.

Finally, we want to encourage those who read these narratives to allow the emotions and experiences of these authors to penetrate the soul as well as the intellect. There are lessons to be learned here that extend far beyond the experience and response to a natural disaster. The lessons learned from these authors are applicable for most of us throughout our daily and professional lives; there is no need to wait for our own hurricanes to learn how to be more effective in all that we do.

#### Post Script:

The following sources are suggested for people who want to read more about Katrina and Rita

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Brenda F. McGadney-Douglass, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Physician Assistant Program on the Health Science Campus at the University of Toledo in Ohio. Richard Douglass, Ph.D., is a Professor in Health Administration at the College of Health and Human Services at Eastern Michigan University. Comments regarding this issue can be sent to: [mcgadney\\_douglass@yahoo.com](mailto:mcgadney_douglass@yahoo.com), or [douglassmcgadney@yahoo.com](mailto:douglassmcgadney@yahoo.com).



The porch of a destroyed home in the 9th Ward, 2007.

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