

## **A Blessed Displacement**

Shortly after I began as rector of St. Andrew's Church a black mother in the neighborhood with her two young boys started attending church regularly. Raised as an Anglican in Belize she felt at home at St. Andrew's. The older son, a nice-looking somewhat slow child, bore her last name; the younger had the last name of his Ugandan father. A single mother, she was coping with work and child-raising; life was not easy. They moved often seeking cheaper housing, but continued at St. Andrew's faithfully. Eventually another out-of-wedlock son was born. The oldest boy began to serve as an acolyte and joined the Youth Group. He also began to have a lot of trouble in school and to get into trouble with the law. His life began to take on the feared "New Orleans street black" identity that often leads to prison or to an early violent death.

One evening the Youth Group and their parents ate supper out at a nearby restaurant. The whole family came. The five year old middle son, sitting next to me, read the menu, chose his hamburger, and then calculated the cost in his head. Next he drew a fine sketch of a house with trees on the paper provided. I knew right then that he should be enrolled in our Parish School where he would join a number of other scholarship children, both white and black, and have a far better chance at a decent education than in the public school near his home. As rector I was able to expedite his entry into St. Andrew's School where he excelled as an athlete and, when pushed, as a student. As the older brother fell more deeply into the chasm of crime and lack of education, he became more and more violent; life at home was intolerable. How to interrupt this evolving tragedy was of considerable pastoral concern to me. What to do?

In sixth grade, because he was a promising athlete and greatly in need of a safer home environment, the middle son was recruited into a Jesuit-sponsored program called Boys Hope in New Orleans. He was to spend weekdays and nights at Boys Hope and weekends at home. On a hot August Thursday afternoon the family, social workers, representatives from Boys Hope and I, sat down to make the final arrangements. He would enter Boys Hope the following Monday, continuing as a student at St. Andrew's. By Saturday we knew Katrina was headed directly toward New Orleans and was a huge, powerful storm. On Sunday Hurricane Katrina hit and Boys Hope literally went down the drain.

After closing up St. Andrew's on Saturday I headed to the only open bank I could find and withdrew most of my funds to help families in need. My next stop was their house where I gave the mother several of the \$100. bills and advised her to load up the boys and get out of town. The money would buy gas, food, and lodging. "Don't let the boys have the money!" I urged. She tucked the bills into her bra and began to pack the car. The oldest son took off to stay with his girlfriend in Mid-City.

Instead of getting out of town, she, with the two younger boys and a male friend, parked her car on the 7th level of a hotel parking garage downtown and then headed for the Superdome. The whole world saw on television what a nightmare that turned out to be. Three days later holding the children over their heads, the couple made their way in chest deep water to an overpass where they spent over 24 hours waiting for any kind of transportation that could get them to anywhere out of New Orleans. A bus came, they got on and ended up in Houston, Texas, where they were taken to a shelter.

One day I received a phone call from the mother in Houston saying she had found transportation to Jackson, Mississippi, where she had family who would take them in until they could get back to New Orleans. A few days later she called again and said the arrangement wasn't working out. They were out in the country, the boys were bored and making all kinds of trouble, and her relatives wanted them to leave. She told me she still had most of the money and wondered if they could return to New Orleans. She sounded desperate. The answer, of course, was "no" there being no place to live, or to work or go to school, no social services, and no hospitals.

I thought for a moment and then told her what to do. "Go to Jackson; hitch-hike if you have to. Go to the Red Cross and then to St. Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral. Call me when you have done those things." Hours later I got a jubilant call: The Red Cross upon hearing her story gave her a debit card worth \$1100. dollars, likely more money than she had ever had at one time. At the Cathedral she was met by the associate rector, an acquaintance of mine, who had just gotten off the telephone with an Episcopal church in Atlanta that wished to sponsor a family from New Orleans. They provided a house, a car, schools for the boys and would look for a job for the parent. That night the family got on a bus in Jackson and headed to Atlanta. A group met them at the bus station with open arms and hearts. What an amazing blessing! I gave thanks that all would be well for that family, at least for awhile.

One year later the mother called me wanting to return to New Orleans. I had to tell her "no" once again for almost the same reasons I had listed before: "You need to stay there at least one more year, before even considering coming back." She was disappointed, but knew I was speaking the truth. The following year the middle son

graduated from eighth grade at Holy Innocents School and the family moved to a suburb of Atlanta where he began high school and his younger brother could receive the special help he needed to get through elementary school. Money was tight, employment sporadic, and the oldest son had gotten into more and more trouble in New Orleans, eventually landing in Parish Prison for two years. We stayed in touch and I helped out the family whenever I could.

The middle son did well in high school becoming a star athlete and was offered a full basketball scholarship to the University of South Carolina. Just before the news conference awarding the scholarship, he called me to say “thank you!” What a marvelous accomplishment! God’s hand surely had been in this turn of events for this family! The oldest son got out of Parish Prison remarkably unscathed and very intent on living a better life. He now attends St. Andrew’s Church with his new family--an honest woman with two lovely little girls. Maybe they’ll be acolytes someday.

Hurricane Katrina tossed everyone in New Orleans up into the air and we all came down somewhere, often somewhere else. The way back to normal life was very hard, universally challenging, but sometimes brought people to a new and better place. In every case I know about, people fleeing the City needed the help of others, a lot of others with significant resources and the desire and means to deliver them. The family I have written about here is just one of many displaced who found a better life elsewhere with greater opportunity. This is what happens when the generosity and care of those who “have” give to those in need. It is the way of Jesus that transforms the world.

