

## Roots Planted Deep: New Orleans After Katrina

*The roots of Val Shexnayder's struggle to stay on her Lower Ninth Ward land go back to the era of Reconstruction.*

Retired letter carrier John Marrero was showing five of us from the International Labor Communications Association around the devastated Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans when we drove past 1628 Reynes Street.

A hand-lettered sign propped up on a lonely stoop in front of a carefully tended, fenced-in FEMA trailer caught our eye. We got out and walked back to read it.

“*No help*. Lower 9th Ward not shown on T.V. and still looking like ‘Katrina’ 2 years later,” it said. “We are still waiting on Road Home money to rebuild with. My house ‘floated away.’ This is what Katrina left – 2 steps. All I want is my life back to normal so I could get out of this mold and formaldehyde FEMA trailer that’s killing me. *We need help*.” Next to the sign Val Shexnayder had written her name and phone number and tacked up a photograph of her former house.



All around were blocks of damaged, boarded up houses, or no homes at all – just front steps with addresses painted on them. Patches of wild grass or the outline of a foundation were all that remained where a house once stood in the predominantly African American community. Flowers on a cross near one demolished home paid tribute to a neighbor who died during Katrina and the flood that followed.

A UPS truck pulled up. The driver hopped out with an envelope and headed up to the fence, but he stopped when Val's two rottweilers started circling the yard and barking.

“I didn’t think you were still delivering down here,” she called out, slowly making her way to the gate to sign for the letter. Seeing our group, she came out to meet us.

“How are you making out?” I asked. She just threw out her arms and hugged me. Then we introduced ourselves, and Val told us her incredible story.

### **“My house floated away”**

Val, 60, made it out of New Orleans on Aug. 28, 2005, the day before Hurricane Katrina hit. She locked up her house, leaving her watch dogs inside, and made a 24-hour drive to Dallas. The

next day the Industrial Canal breached just blocks from her home and severely flooded the Lower Ninth Ward.

“My house floated away with the female dog in it,” she said. “The male dog was just roaming up and down the street.” The Montgomery County Humane Society in Rockville, Maryland, rescued her dogs along with other stranded pets. She eventually found their photos online, and MCHS flew her up to Maryland claim them.

Her house destroyed, Val overcame many obstacles to come home to New Orleans and obtain the FEMA trailer where she has lived since. But FEMA had just called the day before to say they were taking all the trailers back. Val couldn’t believe it.

“I had all the media out here last night in the rain to tell them FEMA is coming to take my trailer,” she told us. “They’re pulling them out because of the formaldehyde and mold. But we’ve got 30,000 people in trailers here. Where are they going to put them?”

Val said FEMA offered to put her up in a hotel, but she wanted no part of it.

“I’ve never rented my whole life,” she said. “I’m going to stay on my property if I have to live in a tent,” she said. “You have to be on the property to avoid theft.” And she should know.

### **Val’s family fought displacement**

Val’s parents, Val and Elizabeth Lindsey, lost their property in 1964 when the National Parks Service used eminent domain to force them out of the historic African American Fazendeville settlement in nearby Chalmette.

“It was located between a national battlefield and a national cemetery,” Val explained. The Parks Service wanted to join the two to form a park and displaced the Fazendeville families to do it.

The Fazendeville Village was founded in 1867 during the Reconstruction era. “Jean Pierre Fazende, a freedman of color and a grocer, divided up the land he had inherited into parcels which he sold to newly emancipated blacks,” wrote Dr. Joyce Marie Jackson in *American Anthropologist* (2006). Val’s mother was descended from one of the original Fazendeville families.

Val’s parents were among the last to hold out against U.S. government displacement in 1964 and would not let their home be demolished. Their house was the only one that was moved from Chalmette to the Lower Ninth Ward, where Val has lived ever since. The house survived Hurricanes Betsy in 1965 and Katrina in 2005, and still stands next door at 1624 Reynes Street.

### **Determined to rebuild**

Val said she did environmental work for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before a disability forced her off the job. Now she suffers from environmental illness, having developed the Katrina cough from toxins in her trailer.

"I worked on the same levee that gave way," she said, pointing toward a spot just visible through some trees. "You can see the levee right over there, behind that white house."

After all she's been through, she has few kind words for federal government policies that have so miserably failed New Orleans in its time of crisis.

"My daughter's in the army fighting a war, and for what?" she said. "The money they spend in Iraq is a waste. They need to be helping us here."

Yet despite her post-Katrina hardships, Val's roots are planted deep. Amid the fields where an extended community once stood, she plans to stay and rebuild. There were some hopeful signs that others are joining her – returning to reconstruct the Lower Ninth Ward and the other vibrant neighborhoods that are the soul of New Orleans in order to keep their rich, centuries-old culture alive for generations to come.

Tipitina's Foundation is raising money to restore R&B artist Fats Domino's Lower Ninth Ward home and to establish a community and music center across the street. Letter carrier Charles McCann, who we talked to on his Ninth Ward route, says he's seen an 80 percent turnaround since he returned home last year to a neighborhood that for him contains "a lot of old memories and a lot of memories washed away."

A few doors down on Reynes Street, someone has put in an elevated foundation for a new house. Val plans to do the same once she gets elevation money from FEMA's Road Home program so she can lay a foundation high enough to start rebuilding her home and her life.

***Story and photos by Molly Charboneau, DC 37, AFSCME – New York City***

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