Art Critic Transformed By Katrina

Doug MacCash was a full-time art critic for the New Orleans newspaper in late August 2005, when weather forecasters began predicting that a potentially deadly Category five hurricane was heading towards the city. So, when he volunteered to ride out the storm in the newspaper's office and help with the coverage, he wasn't sure what to expect.

But on Monday, August 29, just hours after the winds from Hurricane Katrina died down and out-of-town news stations began broadcasting that New Orleans had dodged the worst-case scenario, MacCash and a newspaper colleague would discover the shocking truth.

"We were so unaware that I waited until one in the afternoon for my editor and friend James O'Byrne to finish editing for the next day's paper," MacCash said.

They rode their bikes to see the city's damage. MacCash believed it was a typical Southern Louisiana storm.

"We were very confident that it had been a windstorm and not a flood," O'Byrne said.

The usual routine at the paper was to pack things up and evacuate if the storm was severe. Secure whatever you need to secure at home. O'Byrne's family went to Shreveport, whereas MacCash's mother stayed in New Orleans.

"James and I both brought our bicycles," MacCash said. "The highway was empty. The town had been evacuated for a day or two."

It's common for MacCash and O'Byrne to ride bikes during tropical storms because there is usually heavy traffic due to debris on the roads.

Around two in the afternoon, O'Byrne and MacCash started riding towards the railroad tracks.

"While we were on top of the railroad tracks that go over Canal Boulevard, we became aware that there was not just standing water but water rushing through the street," MacCash said.

It appeared as a lake with beer coolers flowing through. It became apparent that this wasn't the normal storm.

"You'd be surprised how you have to convince yourself that you're seeing what you're seeing," MacCash said.

It wasn't the conventional street flooding. They had seen some street flooding, but it wasn't until they rode their bikes in the street that they realized it was more than just the occasional flood. Highways were disappearing into the sea.

"It was a pinch yourself situation," MacCash said.

His wife and two children left town, but his mother decided to stay behind. She stayed behind in a storm-proof apartment building.

"I warned her that it was going to be very hot, and she would get bored before it was all over," MacCash said, "I had to wonder if she was surrounded by water, and she was in the end. That was on my mind."

They approached different neighborhoods with the same sad issue. There were islands filled with roof shingles instead of sand. The river rose, and people were stuck with nowhere to go.

"We ran into neighbors who believed that maybe one of their neighbors, who was wheelchair-bound, had been caught in the flood," MacCash said. "It is a helpless feeling. We couldn't do much to help."

There were many hopeless people and situations, and MacCash could do nothing about them. He had to report on it and hope these people would be helped. The stranded were shouting at him, and he had to keep moving. One lady's house flooded above her windows, and she was on the roof, shouting to us that she wanted us to call her family and tell them she was all right.

"We started subtly joking that you know she wasn't alright," MacCash said. "We wanted to say that you aren't alright. You are stranded on a roof."

It was a different dynamic for MacCash. He had been an art critic, not someone who went into troublesome situations and reported on them. It was a new field for him, and he had to embrace it.

"I was aware that we were seeing things that the rest of the city, the rest of the country, had to know, and at the same time, you have the instinct of thinking you should be doing something more immediate," MacCash said. "We did not dissolve into emotion immediately. It was a numbing disaster."

But by comparison to others, the lady was alright. She was in the view of some rescuers who were already on their way. The rescuers came seemingly from nowhere. It was still numbing to MacCash. It took time for the enormity of the catastrophe to sink in.

"We realized that this isn't something that's gonna be swept up by that evening, and it hit me that this is a disaster unfolding," MacCash said.

The two were traveling through Lakeview near Lake Pontchartrain when they encountered many stranded people. O'Byrne lived in Lakeview, and they both knew that O'Byrne had lost everything that wasn't in the attic.

“My house was in Lakeview, and so we get over Canal Boulevard, and all of Lakeview is under water, and there’s 12 feet of water over Canal Boulevard,” O’Byrne said. “That’s kind of your holy crap moment.”

They were the first two reporters to see the true nature of the storm without question. They heard a report that part of the 17th Street canal wall had collapsed, but were unsure of its significance.

“We knew in that moment, around 3:30 in the afternoon on Monday, August 29th, while everyone is reporting that the city is dodging a bullet, Doug and I knew that the city would go underwater,” O’Byrne said. “The only others who knew that were those in Lakeview trying to get out of their houses.”

The city has changed since overcoming Katrina. And MacCash has changed since Katrina. He became a journalist. It was reminiscent of the end of “The Wizard of Oz” when the Tin Man received a diploma. He had a brain but needed a diploma.

“Until that point, I had been a critic, but maybe not a journalist per se,” MacCash said. “But by the Friday after Katrina, I was a journalist for real.”

The culture of New Orleans didn’t flood into the Gulf like the water, but it gained a new feeling—a feeling of resurrection and new life. MacCash believes both art and the people were revitalized three years later.

“2008 was an artistic revival in the city, no doubt about it,” MacCash said. “It became this great creative place. Great creative outpouring.”

People were wondering if the carnival culture would live on after the storm. In 2008, a new creativity flooded the city. Young people embraced cultural expression, wrapping their entire cars in vinyl.

“It looked as though they had wrapped their car as advertisement for Lemonhead candy or Flamin' Hot Cheetos, or you name it,” MacCash said. “In my view, it was New Orleans' instinct for costuming that had somehow translated into car culture.”

The culture had a genuine revival, and it was just a year before the New Orleans Saints won the Super Bowl. The city was in a new form, with new people and those who had stuck it out through the travesty. New Orleans was whole again.

Lemonhead wrapped car being showcased in 2008 New Orleans fashion.

Banksy mural showing the heart of New Orleans in 2008 in the Marigny and Treme neighborhoods.