

**The
BLACK
C o M M e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

September 11, 2008 - Issue 290

[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

Race in America
Katrina aftermath still roils Gretna
Town cut off escape route out of New Orleans
By Howard Witt
***Chicago Tribune* correspondent**
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator

Click on the back button of your browser to return to non printer friendly page of this article

[Click here](#) to get helpful hints for viewing and printing this printer friendly plain text page

[DUI Laws](#)

Expert lawyers 866-357-6242 Washington
DC metro area

[Youth Advocacy Degrees](#)

Accredited Health Services Programs Financial
Aid Available: Get Info!

Ads by Google

GRETNA, La.

All Patryce Jenkins wanted was to walk home.

For two days after Hurricane Katrina struck on Aug. 29, 2005, Jenkins had wandered the flooded streets of New Orleans, exhausted, hungry, filthy and terrified. She passed bodies. She avoided looters. She skirted the sweltering, violent Louisiana Superdome - the city's fetid shelter of last resort.

Finally, Jenkins made it downtown to the convention center, where she had been told evacuation buses would be waiting, only to discover a sea of tens of thousands of desperate hurricane victims like her, waiting in vain to be rescued.

Yet Jenkins, at the time a 911 operator for the New Orleans Police Department who was forced from her post when the police headquarters flooded, was so close to home she could taste it. Her apartment was on high ground just a few miles away, across the Mississippi River, on the other side of the New Orleans suburb of Gretna.

So Jenkins set out for home. She started walking up a ramp onto the massive steel Crescent City Connection bridge leading to the other side of the Mississippi River known locally as the West Bank. But she didn't get far. A phalanx of black-clad Gretna police officers, wielding what Jenkins said were "huge guns like they have in Iraq," ordered her to turn back. One officer fired a warning shot over her head.

"I was just trying to get to safety," Jenkins recalled. "I had my driver's license to prove where I lived. But those police didn't even look at my ID. I was called racist names. ... I was just crying in disbelief. I couldn't understand how people could be so heartless to force me back into the hell I had just escaped from."

Three years after Katrina's floodwaters destroyed New Orleans, what happened to Jenkins and hundreds of others who tried to flee the city's chaos by crossing the bridge to Gretna remains the subject of conflicting perceptions, lingering racial bitterness and a variety of civil rights lawsuits now making their way through state and federal courts.

And now there's an added concern: that this week's Hurricane Gustav, as well as an ominous line of still more tropical storms gathering out in the Atlantic Ocean, will push the Gretna bridge incident even deeper into the obscurity of the history books, unaddressed and unresolved.

Tribal instincts took over

To many African-Americans and other Gretna critics, the decision by officials of the mostly white suburb to bar entry to the mostly black victims of Katrina amounted to an overtly racist - and blatantly unconstitutional - blockade of the only escape route they could find.

"We questioned why we couldn't cross the bridge," recalled Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky, two San Francisco paramedics who were trapped in New Orleans when Katrina struck and who led a group that tried to cross into Gretna.

"[The police] responded that the West Bank was not going to become New Orleans, and there would be no Superdomes in their city," the paramedics wrote later in an essay about their experience. "These were code words for: If you are poor and black, you are not crossing the Mississippi River, and you are not getting out of New Orleans."

Yet to Gretna officials, and even some black residents of the town that is 56 percent white and 36 percent black, blocking off the bridge was the only prudent way to protect their hurricane-ravaged municipality from the looting and violence that seemed to be erupting all across New Orleans. Although Gretna did not flood like New Orleans, officials said they had no food, water, shelter or transportation to offer to the New Orleans refugees.

"I don't feel like it was a matter of not letting them cross the bridge because of their skin color," said Rev. Jesse Pate, pastor of the predominantly African-American Harvest Ripe Church in Gretna, who sheltered some of his own displaced parishioners for several days after Katrina struck, until city officials ordered them to evacuate. "There was nothing here to serve them with. Gretna didn't let its own residents stay. We were asked to leave."

On one point, at least, nearly everyone seems to agree: Atop the bridge to Gretna, under the strain of an unprecedented crisis, the thin veneer of American civilization peeled back for a moment to reveal the atavistic, tribally protective impulses coursing beneath.

"No one in America today can realize the collapse of civil authority that happened in this area after Katrina," said Ronnie Harris, Gretna's mayor for the past 23 years. "People think, 'That can't happen here.' Well, it did happen. It was a return to basic human nature, a clannish feeling. You clung to people you know, people you trust and what's familiar and comfortable to you."

Constitutional rights?

The question now making its way through the courts is the legality of the way Gretna officials acted on that clannish feeling. Plaintiffs in at least four civil lawsuits are seeking

class-action certification at a court hearing later this month for their claims that the closing of the Crescent City Connection bridge violated their constitutional rights, including the right to peaceful assembly, equal protection and freedom from cruel and unusual punishment.

"It was absolutely inhuman," said Adele Owen, an attorney representing some of the plaintiffs. "These people hadn't slept, they had no food, they had no water, they had no place to stay. And [Gretna police] sent them back to the Superdome."

Much of the case against Gretna turns on the judgment by local officials - critics call it racially induced hysteria - that their town of 17,423 was facing an imminent threat from New Orleans looters and criminals.

"If you are in your house and they're rioting all around to get in, are you going to let them in?" Gretna Police Chief Arthur Lawson was quoted as saying in the New Orleans Times-Picayune a month after Katrina struck. "We saved our city and protected our people."

'Nobody died'

Harris insists race had nothing to do with his stricken city's decision to close its border with New Orleans. He noted, for example, that whites as well as blacks were among the Katrina victims turned back by police - and that Gretna officials were acting on assurances from state and federal officials that hundreds of buses were on the way to New Orleans to evacuate the city.

"Nobody got hurt, nobody died, but the world is left with the impression that we are a racist community, and that is incorrect and totally unfair," Harris said.

But the plaintiffs say they never expected Gretna to serve as their refuge. All they wanted was the right to walk through the town on their way out of New Orleans - a right of free travel that they believe no American community should be able to violate.

"I just don't want this to happen again if we have another hurricane like Katrina," said Joycelyn Askew, another Katrina victim who was turned back on the bridge and is a plaintiff in one of the lawsuits. "I just wouldn't want anybody to have their rights violated like this so that they can't be allowed to escape."

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](#)


[Click here to comment on this article
or see what others are saying in the
The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog](#)

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Howard Witt, is the Southwest Bureau Chief in Houston, TX for the Chicago Tribune. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Witt.

[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

Click Here To
CONTRIBUTE TO  NOW



Any BlackCommentator.com article may be re-printed so long as it is re-printed in its entirety and full credit given to the author and www.BlackCommentator.com. If the re-print is on the Internet we additionally request a link back to the original piece on our Website.

Your comments are always welcome.

eMail re-print notice

If you send us an eMail message we may publish all or part of it, unless you tell us it is not for publication. You may also request that we withhold your name.

Thank you very much for your readership.

Website Design and Hosting provided by



Copyright © 2002 - 2008
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved