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**Cover Story #2  
A Trailer Park Tale  
Three Years After Katrina  
By Deepa Fernandes  
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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The elegant-sounding address of 2000 Groom Road belies the reality. "A cow pasture, that's what I like to call our home" Lena Beard declared back in December 2006, referring to the country's largest FEMA trailer park in which she had lived since October 2005. The 62 acre field, with its orderly rows of little white trailers in the city of Baker, Louisiana, was home to grazing cows before the devastating 2005 hurricane. In the months after the storm, with a \$100 million no-bid contract awarded by the federal government, a well known and politically-connected Louisiana company, the Shaw Group, cleared the land and the cattle, and erected a vast FEMA trailer park. "We ended up here after being housed in a church where I lived on a mattress since I had to evacuate from New Orleans. This is the next step up from the mattresses." Lena's home in New Orleans, the city in which she was born and raised, was damaged by the flooding after the levies burst. Lena lost her home, she lost most every belonging she owned, and she relocated her life to a FEMA trailer in "Renaissance Village," located 90

miles from her home town.

"That's President Bush hugging me. See how tightly he's hugging me?" Lena asked me in late 2006 as she proudly dangled a newspaper clipping at me. When President Bush didn't hesitate to throw his arms around Lena and embrace her in the days after the storm as she took refuge on a mattress in a church, Lena really thought that she was going to be ok. "I'm a veteran who has served my country and put my life on the line. I wasn't scared when the hurricane hit, I believed my country would take care of me and my family."

It's been three years since the devastating storms of Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast region and the ensuing floods rendered hundreds of thousands homeless. In the early weeks and months, and even up to the first anniversary of the storms, the nation heard stories of hardship and loss. We watched the FEMA screw-ups, the excruciatingly slow and inadequate response from the Bush Administration, and heard prominent elected officials muse over whether it actually made sense to rebuild a city like New Orleans. Reality TV shows featured home make-overs for destitute families and citizens nationwide opened their homes and wallets to give to the cause. Slowly the plight of life-long residents of Gulf Coast cities disappeared from the news. Yet the displacement, government neglect and suffering continued. Lena and her family have received little help, despite the highest level promises made to them by President Bush himself.

Baker is 90 miles away and a world apart from the vibrant French Quarter of New Orleans where the 2005 floods seem to be a distant memory. Bars and restaurants on the main drag of Canal street very quickly returned to their customary party mode; street vendors and performers were back on the sidewalks within months, and with a short time period it once again became impossible to get a table at the famous 24-hour Café Du Monde. But just a short distance away, the rest of the city festered. Whole neighborhoods remained rotting ghost towns while in others, life only returned at every fourth home. Ray Nagin was returned to office as Mayor and Democratic governor Kathleen Blanco was ousted by a much diminished electorate to be replaced by an arch-conservative republican. Things in New Orleans have changed.

Hurricane Katrina was an ecological disaster, heightened by a planning and engineering disaster. What has resulted is nothing short of a social disaster. Almost three years later, while some areas of the city have bounced back, it is now possible to discern a pattern emerging of what the new New Orleans looks like: On the one hand, witness the city's rebirth. The tourist areas, as well as the middle and high-income parishes of New Orleans, which are mostly white areas, have been rebuilt. On the other hand, consider the massive, quasi-permanent displacement of a sizeable number of poor, mostly black residents. Tens of thousands were assigned a travel trailer, either on a FEMA group site or to place in front of their damaged home. Trailers became the disaster recovery housing of choice for the government. As the months and years passed, with little hope of return, many formally displaced residents began to adapt to life in their small tin box. The numbers tell the story.

As of June 2007, 92% of hotels in New Orleans were rebuilt and operational. Meanwhile, a full year later, in May 2008, 40% of public schools still remained closed. [\[1\]](#) The repopulation of the New Orleans area peaked in mid 2007 but then declined dramatically in late 2007 and early 2008. While in the majority white Jefferson Parish, 98.1% of pre-Katrina households have begun receiving mail again, in St. Bernard parish that same figure is only 44.5% of pre-Katrina levels. [\[2\]](#) St Bernard Parish was home to African American public housing residents whose homes were bulldozed earlier this year. There is no data to show where these families have gone. [\[3\]](#)

The statistics for childcare centers, public transportation and employment, all markers of infrastructure that allow for the return of lower-income residents, tell a stark story. Only 117 childcare centers have reopened since the hurricane, compared with 275 before the 2005 flooding. [4] By mid 2007, almost 10,000 employers had closed or moved out of the region, while only 6,000 new businesses replaced them. And by February 2008, only 19% of the numbers of pre-Katrina public buses are back and running. [5]

So where have people gone?

At its height, there were almost 75,000 trailers being used by families from the New Orleans area. By the fall of 2007 the number of active trailers still numbered over 50,000. People lived in their temporary homes so long it began to seem like they would never leave. That was until early 2008, with mounting criticism over the excessively high levels of the cancer causing toxin formaldehyde found in these FEMA trailers, the rapid decommissioning of the trailers began. In the first quarter of 2008, FEMA displaced over 10,000 trailer residents. [6] There is no data available to show where these families went.

By June 2008, FEMA spokesperson Gina Cortez told Mother Jones, "FEMA has closed 106 of its 111 group sites in Louisiana. Renaissance Village is one of them." Lena received a knock at her trailer door one June morning, was told she had two days to pack her things, and was promptly sent to a hotel where she was given 30 days to find alternative accommodation. Two years and ten months after the most devastating natural disaster to hit the United States in modern history stripped Lena and her sons of their life in New Orleans, the Beard family are again looking at imminent homelessness.

When I first met Lena, it was over a year since President Bush hugged her in the shelter and it was the first time she had come out of her FEMA trailer at Renaissance Village in almost one month. Lena was addressing a meeting, "people's been here so long they don't even remember what their life was like before Katrina." Heads nodded in agreement with Lena's forthright and emotional statement. It was a resident's meeting, called by community organizers from the New Orleans Workers Center for Racial Justice, which Lena learned about that day and decided to attend. The nodding heads and vocal appreciations, "you tell it sister" and "uh-huh, uh-huh," confirmed her feelings to be very much shared and understood by the gathered residents. Lena concluded, "and there sure ain't much of anything to do here all day besides watch TV in your trailer. I'm not proud that this is my first time out in almost one month. And I'm not proud that my children see me staying in bed all day, but I don't know what to do. I just don't." "I feel you honey, I feel you" came a sympathetic response.

Renaissance Village was constructed by the Shaw Group and is the largest FEMA trailer park in the country. It was hurriedly erected in the months after Katrina as it became clear that the church halls and motel rooms where evacuees were housed could not sustain them much longer. The Shaw Group also outfitted three other trailer parks near the Baton Rouge airport as well as 15 smaller sites in New Orleans with temporary housing. The initial \$100 million dollar no-bid contract was increased in October 2005 to \$500 million. Shaw deflected the criticism that it did not have to compete with other companies to win the contract, telling the Times-Picayune that "we've performed for them before...we're a known quantity." [7] The known quantity for Shaw was its key lobbyist, Joe Allbaugh, who not only worked as the former FEMA director, but is also a close friend of President Bush.

Shaw lobbied fast and hard in the weeks after the storm, and was a major presence at

the September 26 "Katrina Reconstruction Summit" hosted in the Hart building on Capitol Hill. Barely one month after Katrina, this summit gathered 300 corporate lobbyists and lawyers to learn how they could access federal contracts. Shaw's executive vice president is Edward Badolato, who served as former deputy assistant energy secretary under Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. In a Rolling Stone article titled, "Looting Homeland Security," authors Eric Klinenberg and Thomas Frank document how Badolato not only maneuvered to get his company the no-bid contract, but also actively reassured other lobbyists that the disaster would be a bounty for all of them.

Lena received one of the Shaw trailers in Renaissance Village for herself and her two sons. The trailer was approximately 8 foot by 32 foot, with two sectioned-off ends that served as bedrooms. Each time I was in Lena's trailer, even if she was watching TV in her "room," with the flimsy door shut, everyone in the trailer could hear what the other was doing. "There's no such thing as a private conversation anymore" Lena's eldest son Victor told me. From the other room, Lena's TV blasted a talk show featuring a woman whose finger and toe nails were excessively long like witches claws causing Lena to gasp in horror. This provided enough background noise for Victor and I to have a somewhat private conversation about private conversations.

On that December day when I met Lena she was sitting at a resident's meeting of the "Baker Survivors Council," in the big white tent. "Things have gotten so bad here that no one wants to do anything," Lena told the meeting. As the chilly winter winds whipped past the flaps, it was clear that few saw the possibility of returning home any time soon. 90 miles away from New Orleans, Renaissance residents struggled to find work that would ultimately help them relocate back to their home city. As they were turned down for jobs or struggled with the 3 hour commute in each direction, few were able to leave the trailer park.

75% of Renaissance residents, according to the Joe Meyer of the security firm Knight Protective Services, that patrols the trailer park, came from the lower 9th ward in New Orleans. According to the 2000 Census, pre-Katrina, one quarter of residents in this ward earned less than \$10,000 and 36% lived in poverty. [8] 98.3% of residents were African American. [9] There was substantial home ownership in the Lower Nine because homes had been passed down through the generations. Yet most residents were unable able to afford the cost of rebuilding and sold their properties for a pittance or simply could not make it back to claim them before the City bulldozed them. Meyer believes some of the former Renaissance residents relocated to apartments in Baker but he shrugs when asked where most went, "I don't think anybody knows."

From February of 2007 through the summer months, Lena actively pursued various options to move her family back to New Orleans. She commuted in on weekends to work a bar job on Canal St which didn't last long due to her extremely poor health that made it hard for her to stand for eight consecutive hours. In July 2007, just one month shy of her two year displacement anniversary, a final housing option fell through. With no job and having spent down the last of her precious saved dollars in the years since the storm, Lena was unable to come up with the money to cover a security deposit and the first and last months' rent. She was devastated.

Renaissance Village sits at the end of Groom Road, which runs right off the main drag of Baker, a fifteen minute walk from the office of Mayor Rideau, a four-term African American mayor, who used to be an oil executive. In fact, as you enter the town limits of Baker from Baton Rouge, the huge oil storage tanks that proliferate on either side of the main road point to a wealth that most town residents don't enjoy.

Mayor Rideau says he wasn't consulted in any meaningful manner by the federal government about the influx of storm-affected people to his small town, nor has he been privy to any proposal for moving people back to New Orleans. "If there is a plan no one has shared it with me... As far as I know there is no plan." Mayor Rideau is adamant that the plan should come from FEMA. He further decried the vast expenditure of money to keep the trailer park running, at the expense, he believes, of building permanent housing. "The money spent on this trailer facility is unbelievable. We're looking at \$50,000 per unit to do the work and get people in there. And if you look at the cost since -- security, utility and maintenance costs -- you are probably looking at \$75 to \$80,000 per unit if you average it out. With that you could really build a house."

So why not spend that money and construct permanent housing for people? "Well," the Mayor responded, "it's the time factor." FEMA operates to meet emergency and temporary needs. The federal government agency, by its own mission, does not deal with long-term planning. Mayor Rideau had pushed for permanent housing with Bush Administration officials, which he says there was some agreement about. Yet months shy of Katrina's two year anniversary, the Mayor lamented, "I can honestly say that not one nail has been driven" towards the construction of permanent homes.

FEMA reiterates that its mission, beyond meeting emergency needs, is to simply complete repairs to infrastructure to get a disaster area back to the exact state it was in before the disaster.<sup>5</sup> FEMA won't build new housing for displaced residents, even if it could be done for less money than what it costs to temporarily house people, because it is simply outside of its stated job description. So if FEMA is not responsible because of it only deals with temporary solutions, and the Mayor of Baker has no budget or political power to make it happen, then who should?

At the heart of the rebuilding debate is the question of whose interests are primarily being served, former residents or the corporations doing the rebuilding? Displaced low-income residents have lost their social networks and their structured political voice. As they scramble to recover both, their city is being rebuilt without them.

By January 2007 at a meeting of the Baker Survivor Council, talk about going home was not even mentioned as residents had new issues to work on, including the sudden appearance of cockroaches and mice in their trailers. One resident said he had called FEMA about the issue and was told that it was not FEMA's problem. The residents had never heard of the Shaw Group and had no idea who to target to try and get their trailers fixed to prevent against the invading critters.

By January 2008, the formaldehyde scandal had broken and many Renaissance residents, like Lena, had spent the last the last few months trying to have their trailers tested or secure alternative housing. Few were successful at either.

By late 2007 Lena seemed resigned to life in a trailer. In her good moments, the times when she owned her own home still seemed so close. "I'm a two-time home owner in my life. My children used to have their own rooms," Lena remarked. She smiled dreamily as she remembered how their life was. "Eric had a sign on his door that said Keep Out. And they both had computers. Our life was very different. And now you see me in this trailer and people view us as if we were nobody, and when you meet someone like me and my family, you might wonder how could they have had that? Well we did."

In the years after the storm, for most of the Renaissance Village residents, moving back to New Orleans became less and less realistic, so much so, that Lena had stopped pursuing any housing option that was further from her Baker trailer than Baton Rouge.

And oddly enough, the cramped and toxic trailers became the only security most residents had. "This is home and I ain't going to move into any slum just because FEMA tell me I have to" Lena lamented in early 2008 referring to the apartments FEMA had on its lists of available long-term rentals. Around this time, because of mounting pressure due to the consistent findings of high levels of formaldehyde in FEMA trailers across Louisiana and Mississippi, FEMA began an aggressive push to shut down its trailer parks. After two years and nine months FEMA finally deemed, in a statement to Mother Jones, "travel trailers are not suitable for long-term housing." FEMA spokesperson Gina Cortez said that federal agency was going "to relocate families into safer and more permanent housing." And with that, Renaissance Village was emptied of its residents in a matter of months.

Lena and her family were one of the five last families to leave the trailer park

After her eviction from her FEMA trailer in June 2008, Lena and her family moved into a nearby motel for which FEMA footed the bill and gave them thirty days to find something else. While Gina Cortez touts that FEMA has helped "all eligible trailer residents transition into long-term housing," this claim is disingenuous. Firstly there are no available data on where these trailer residents have gone. Ask around the motels where former Renaissance residents are frantically counting down their last 30 days, and one learns that people have moved to homes of relatives in other states, are living in cars or have joined the New Orleans homeless population which is rapidly growing. Secondly, as Lena has been shocked to learn, a simple mistake like giving FEMA your married name once and your maiden name another time is enough to render one ineligible for housing transition assistance. While her birth certificate and marriage certificate were lost in the 2005 floods, and with her FEMA-funded days in the motel quickly ticking away, Lena cannot convince her caseworker that her traumatized, post-Katrina state was responsible for her giving two different last names. It is a battle she is still fighting with just days left in the motel. "I'm so tired from all this" Lena told me in the motel room that now housed the belongings she was able to salvage from her trailer before she was locked out of it. "I just want my family to live in a decent home after all we have been through so we can rebuild our lives. Is that too much to ask?"

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**BlackCommentator.com** Guest Commentator Deepa Fernandes, is a progressive award-winning journalist, who is currently the host of *Wakeup Call*, the morning news show at WBAI 99.5 FM in New York. She is also Co-Director of the [Peoples Production House](#) and the author of "[Targeted: Homeland Security and the Business of Immigration](#)" published by 7stories Press and a Puffin writing fellow at the Nation Institute. Click [here](#) to contact Ms. Fernandes.

[1] [http://www.gnocdc.org/maps/orleans\\_schools.pdf](http://www.gnocdc.org/maps/orleans_schools.pdf)

[2] <http://www.gnocdc.org/media/GNOCDCJun30-08.pdf>

[3] [http://www.fema.gov/pdf/hazard/hurricane/2005katrina/la\\_iag.pdf](http://www.fema.gov/pdf/hazard/hurricane/2005katrina/la_iag.pdf)

[4] [http://www.gnocdc.org/maps/orleans\\_child\\_care.pdf](http://www.gnocdc.org/maps/orleans_child_care.pdf)

[5] Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and the Brookings Institute, "The New Orleans Index." April 2008; <http://www.gnocdc.org/NOLAIndex/ESNOLAIndex.pdf>

[6] Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and the Brookings Institute, "The New Orleans Index." April 2008; <http://www.gnocdc.org/NOLAIndex/ESNOLAIndex.pdf>


[7] Bill Walsh, "FEMA isn't hiring LA companies, workers;" [Times-Picayune](#); 10-10-05

[8] <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/8/22/income.html>

[9] <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/8/22/people.html>

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