

# HUMAN RELATIONS NEWS

JUL AUG SEPT 2005

Newsletter of the Louisiana Council on Human Relations

Vol. 41, No. 4

Incorporating the Baton Rouge Human Relations Council News

## KATRINA AND RITA RAVAGE SOUTH LOUISIANA

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Louisiana suffered two massive blows in September. We are still unsettled by the disturbing images and reports, in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita. Doubtless, many of our readers have friends and family who've been directly affected.

While there will be much soul-searching and finger-pointing for some time, there are several matters that are obvious to everyone. For one, government offices were poorly prepared to handle a disaster of this magnitude, especially at the federal level. Budget cuts and reorganization left FEMA crippled and proposed improvements on levees neglected.

At the last board meeting of the L.C.H.R. a resolution was passed to publicly go on record in opposition to the War in Iraq, and for speedy withdrawal of troops. While the Council usually

concerns itself with in-state issues, these were being affected by the War, as it undermines life and liberty of all citizens.

We recall how Dr. Martin King, Jr. was compelled to speak out against the War in Vietnam, as it began to erode the nation's ability to address poverty and implement social policies responsive to the Civil Rights Movement. As a clergyman he had to oppose a war which was so bloody and immoral in its conduct.

The Council decided to publicly oppose the war in Iraq for similar reasons. A huge number of National Guard have been torn from their families here in Louisiana right when another hurricane season was approaching. Their business should have been here, held in readiness for disaster service. It was most appropriate that Gov. Kathleen Blanco made formal request to the President to have the Guard units sent home with haste following Katrina.

Another obvious lesson of the double-whammy of Katrina and Rita was how the poor are left out of the loop. They were not consulted or taken into consideration in decision-making. While those of means move on and rebuild, the poor are left with no resources. As so many of the evacuees from New Orleans were African-American, the reaction in receiving communities was sometimes tinged with racism. In Lafayette ungrounded rumors of a crime spree spawned by black males from New Orleans caused gun shops to quickly sell out their deadly merchandise.

It remains to be seen how the poor will be included as New Orleans rebuilds. Will new schools, housing and public services be more equitably mixed and available?

## **A VISIT TO THE NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM IN MEMPHIS**

This summer your editor had the good fortune to tour the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, TN. That city will forever be linked with the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968. He was shot on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, while there to support the striking garbage workers. After public accommodations were opened to all, regardless of race, the Lorraine Motel fell on hard times, and was about to be torn down. Prominent Memphians organized an effort to save the building. This effort led to the creation of a state-of-the-art museum to give due honor to the history of the struggle of African-Americans for full civil and human rights. It has been operating for nearly 14 years.

The façade of the Lorraine Motel was retained and a modern museum structure built around it. A wreath marks the balcony spot where King was shot. Visitors from around the world stop to remember this event and to honor the memory of King, who contributed so much to that momentous movement that expanded the boundaries of freedom, justice and equality.

The mission statement reads, "The National Civil Rights Museum, located at the Lorraine Motel, the site of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, chronicles key episodes of the American civil rights movement and the legacy of this movement to inspire participation in civil and human rights efforts globally, through our collections, exhibi-

tions, and educational programs."

A special exhibit was in progress that had been curated at the museum and will later be on tour. It focused on the Voting Rights Act, and the struggle for access to the ballot. When the United States was established, voting was only open to white males who were property owners. These rights were gradually expanded, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was the most significant piece of legislation to assure ballot access and political participation to those who had been excluded. This legislation must be renewed by Congress periodically and another renewal will be due before too long. It will be important to impress upon Congress that the safeguards of this legislation must be protected and extended.

The principal exhibit has a great deal of textual historical explanation and images of the entire span of the African-American saga of struggle for equality. There is an actual bus of 50's vintage in which a life-size statue of a bus-driver barks orders to a statue of Rosa Parks, ordering her off the bus. There is a full-size garbage truck from the fleet of the City of Memphis when garbage workers struck, and an actual lunch counter with audio and visual effects of the violence against the students who sat in. There are dramatic presentations of the Little Rock Central H.S. debacle, the riotous reaction to the integration of Old Miss, and the burned-out hulk of

a bus on which the Freedom Rides took place. A circuitous path eventually leads to Room 306, as it was on the day when occupied by Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy. The solemnity and simplicity of this spot is palpable, especially after being exposed to the story of all the suffering and sacrifice of Black people over so many decades.

Several years ago the museum expanded to include two old buildings a short block away. One of these was a rooming house from where assassin bullets were fired. Housed here are a larger Gift Shop, exhibits about the aftermath of the assassination, and of the global nature of the struggle for civil and human rights. On every continent and among every oppressed group, people have been (*cont. on p. 3*)

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**See page 4 for B.R. residents.**

inspired and emboldened by the African-American Civil Rights Movement.

There is a lone voice of protest against the Civil Rights Museum. Ms. Jackie Clark has held an outdoor corner vigil, rain or shine, for the past 14 years. She was the last resident of the Lorraine Motel and left unwillingly. She has contended that the Museum is an example of gentrification and that the millions of dollars that have gone into it would have better served the intent of Dr. King by going toward the needs of the poor.

This writer was deterred from entering the museum many years ago by Ms. Clark's protest, but through years of museum-going has a strong conviction that it is vital that historical and cultural institutions are developed which can bring the story and lessons of the past to the people of today. That is the role of museums. The Civil Rights Movement was so significant that it is absolutely necessary for its history be honored and interpreted in such an institutional fashion, and so that those who suffered and died be given fitting memorial.



## ***2005 National Civil Rights Museum Freedom Awards***

Each year the National Civil Rights Museum presents an awards dinner and fund-raiser at which individuals who have made significant contributions in civil and human rights are honored. The first honorees were Rosa Parks, James Farmer, and Coretta Scott King. Other recipients include Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Barbara Jordan, Justice Thurgood Marshall, Marian Wright Edelman, Jimmie Carter, Dorothy Height, Elie Wiesel, Andrew Young, Yitzhak Rabin, Jackie Robinson, Colin Powell, Lech Walesa, Mikhail Gorbachev, Benjamin Hooks, Harry Belafonte, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Arias, Sidney Poitier, Rigoberta Menchu, Julian Bond, Maxine Smith, Bill Clinton, John Lewis, and Bono.

Joining this illustrious company at the Nov. 3rd banquet will be Paul Rusesabagina, Oprah Winfrey, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis.

Mr. Rusesabagina, from Rwanda, is a heroic hotelier, whose story has been told in the movie "Hotel Rwanda." Oprah Winfrey is known to all as a media magnate for whom humanitarian and social concerns loom large. Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis are the leading couple of the American theater and long-time civil rights activists to boot. The award for Ossie Davis will be given posthumously as he died just a few months ago at the age of 87. Dee and Davis had been married for 57 years.

The National Civil Rights Museum recently received a \$100,000 technology grant from the Assisi Foundation. While the Museum was considered state-of-the-art when it opened, interactive video and computer models have since come into vogue, and are so familiar in the lives of younger people. The current displays are very text-heavy. This grant will study how the museum can best update its display and presentation and remodel by the end of this decade.

The National Civil Rights Museum is a non-profit organization and relies heavily upon admissions, memberships, gift shop sales, and public and private donations. The admission fee is \$12 and \$10 for senior citizens. You may visit the Museum at their web address of [www.civilrightsmuseum.org](http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org). Better yet, you may visit it in person at 450 Mulberry St. Memphis, TN. The hours have some seasonal fluctuation. Call (901)521-9699 for further information if you plan to visit Memphis, which is an easy 6-hour ride up I-55 from Baton Rouge. There is much to see in Memphis, which is a River City like Baton Rouge. The Museum has helped spur revitalization of a once-dying end of the downtown, with new galleries and restaurants.

## More on Katrina from Paul Burns

We Louisianians hoped the storm would either weaken or hit somewhere else. But it strengthened and struck the Mississippi coast, a few miles east of New Orleans. New Orleans and surrounding areas were devastated by the high winds and by the water, which got into the city from the broken levees and flooded most of its homes and businesses.

Refugees from New Orleans were evacuated to Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Houston, Dallas, St. Louis, and many other places. At this writing, the authorities are trying to evacuate the last 10,000 or so from New Orleans and to collect the dead bodies which lie in the polluted water.

Baton Rouge government, universities, and churches have organized to help the thousands of refugees. Assistant editor Paul Burns offered his home as a refuge and was sent a young man and his mother, both workers at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. They stayed at the hospital while the hurricane raged and flood waters rose, escaping clothed in their working 'scrubs'. Shopping at Wal-Mart on September 7, the mother and Burns were approached by a man and his wife from New Jersey, who said that a group from their church had come to help hurricane victims. He paid for their basket of food and gave the mother a \$50 Wal-Mart pre-paid card. This is just one of the many stories being told of the neighborly concern being exhibited by American citizens during this tragedy.

## 46th in Democracy Index

Louisiana once again ranks near the bottom, in a recent report issued by Fair Vote, a project of the Center for Voting and Democracy. In reviewing U.S. House elections from 1982 to 2004 Louisiana received low ranking because of high incumbency (only one incumbent defeated) and the lowest turnout at 39% of all 50 states. The entire report may be viewed at <http://www.fairvote.org/dubdem>.



## LCHR Board Business Meeting Held July 9

The LCHR Board held a meeting July 9 at the home of Doris and Overton White in Plaisance. A motion was adopted to commend Senator Mary Landrieu for being at the forefront of the adoption in the U.S. Senate of a resolution apologizing for the many years during which the senate resisted passage of legislation outlawing lynching.

There was a discussion of the revelation by JP Morgan Chase/Bank One that two of its predecessor banks in Louisiana allowed enslaved Africans to be used as loan collateral and then owned slaves. As reparation, the bank said it would create a \$5 million college scholarship fund for African-Americans in Louisiana.

The current officers (see mast-head) of LCHR were re-elected, except that Richard Haymaker was elected Membership Secretary, replacing Leslie Burris, who declined to be re-elected.

## ENTERGY RACISM VIDEO

*The Eye of a Storm* is a video produced by the power company Entergy. It looks at a 3rd grade all-white classroom in Iowa and explores the damaging effects of racism upon children. BRCHR member Roberta Madden was very moved by the video and recommended it as a teaching tool in an article published in *The Advocate*. Organizations may check out the video by contacting Beverly Trahan at (225-381-5764 or at [brtraha1@Entergy.com](mailto:brtraha1@Entergy.com).

## LOUISIANA JUSTICE COALITION

The Louisiana Justice Coalition has begun a public education campaign to emphasize the crisis in Louisiana's indigent justice system. As *LOUISIANA CURE* points out, the L.J.C. is working to create an indigent defense system which complies with national standards recommended by the American Bar Association, especially for juveniles. It is no surprise to LCHR members who have lived in Louisiana a long time that Louisiana is considered by experts to have one of the worst indigent defense systems in the country. For example, accused persons often spend more time in jail waiting for trial than they could possibly serve even if found guilty and often the only meetings between an indigent defendant and his or her attorney take place in the courtroom moments before the trial.

## LOUISIANA C.U.R.E.

The Louisiana Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants (C.U.R.E.) is part of a nationwide grass-roots organization dedicated to reducing crime through reform of the criminal justice system. The Louisiana group has recently been growing with a couple of new chapters started up in Lake Charles and Houma. They track and propose legislation that effects inmates of correctional facilities. Louisiana has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the Western Hemisphere. LA C.U.R.E. publishes a very informative quarterly newsletter. For \$10 you may join C.U.R.E. and receive their newsletter. Send your name and address to:

*Louisiana C.U.R.E.*  
P.O. Box 181  
Baton Rouge, LA 70821



## Freedom of Information

In 2001 then-U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft placed significant restrictions on releases of documents not strictly required by the Freedom of Information Act. Arguing that “homeland security” dictated a decreased emphasis on civil liberties, Ashcroft said that the FOIA threatened his mandate to strengthen security measures in the so-called “War on Terror”. Civil liberties advocates and journalists have battled back, and were surprised this summer when Ashcroft’s successor, Alberto Gonzales, indicated a willingness to review the FOIA restrictions. In early August, FOIA advocates won a victory when the Pentagon, in response to a lawsuit, released new and uncensored images of flag-draped coffins of US troops returning from the Middle East.

The FOIA has been an important tool for transparency in government, and a deterrent on government spying on activist citizens. The process of obtaining information through the FOIA has become much more laborious and expensive than was initially the case. The National Security Archive is an independent nonprofit in Washington, D.C. which holds a library of declassified documents, and also serves as a research institute, indexer and publisher of documents and a public interest law firm defending public access to government files. The NSA website ([www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/)) outlines how to make an FOIA request and has other useful info. (from *Fellowship* 9/10-05)



## LA Environmental Advocacy

A recent feature story in the August 7th issue of *The Advocate* carried information about six Louisianians who share a passion for protecting the environment. Featured were Mary Lee Orr, Florence T. Robinson, Kathy Rhorer Wascom, Nancy Roberts, and Willie Fontenot, all of Baton Rouge; and Wilma Subra of New Iberia (a recipient of the LCHR Oliver-Sigur Humanitarian Award). Mary Lee Orr is executive director of Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN). Florence Robinson (a recipient of the BRCHR Powell-Reznikoff Humanitarian Award) founded the North Baton Rouge Environmental Assn. Wascom has lobbied the legislature on environmental issues for many years. Roberts helped create Friends of the Environment and is executive director of the LA Resource Center for Educators, Fontenot served for 27 years as an environmental outreach specialist in the Attorney General’s office. Ms. Subra is a chemist who specializes in helping communities with questionable water quality. In recent months she has investigated the problem in Cow Island in Vermillion Parish and the post-Katrina chemical soup in New Orleans. Kudos to all these great ladies.

## RELIGIOUS CONFLUENCE IN MONTH OF OCTOBER

At a time in history when religious conflict has reemerged, a confluence of sacred moments arises in October 2005, which invite us to pray with or alongside each other, and to work together for peace, justice, human rights, and the healing of our wounded earth.

For Muslims and Jews the sacred lunar months of Ramadan and Tishrei, culminating in Yom Kippur, both begin Oct 3-4. The feast of St. Francis, revered by most Christians, is on Oct. 4th, October 2nd is both World-wide Protestant Community Sunday and the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, great prophet of non-violence. October 4th through the 13th is a holy season of Hindus, and the rainy season of reflection of the Buddhists ends on Oct. 18th.

A nation-wide fast on October 13th is proposed by the Shalom Center in Philadelphia and endorsed by numerous religious bodies. It is also suggested that October would be a propitious time for inter-faith activities that promote dialogue and understanding between faith communities.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Center writes that “in light of the fact that we are standing on the precipice of religious war and repression, rabbis, cantors, priests, nuns, ministers, and imams—perhaps with their congregants—could take some action during Ramadan/Tishrei month to change public policy in favor of protecting human rights, healing the earth, and achieving peace in the whole region where Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah sojourned. We urge those of all our traditions to begin now, in our own cities and neighborhoods to plan with each other how to use God’s October Surprise of these sacred dates to carry out God’s will that we live in peace together.” (from *FELLOWSHIP Magazine* 5/6-05) For further info write: The Shalom Center, Lincoln Dr., Philadelphia PA 19119. On the web see [www.shalomctr.org](http://www.shalomctr.org) or [www.tentofabraham.org](http://www.tentofabraham.org)

# The Baton Rouge Human Relations Council Newsletter

JUL/AUG/SEPT 2005

VOL. 40, NO. 1

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## USE THE BRCHR WEBSITE

Our website is [www.brchr.org](http://www.brchr.org). Please visit this website. We take a lot of time and effort to get a variety of information on it. Besides information about the internal workings of the Council, we are including information about local events of interest to Baton Rouge Human Relations Council members. This information can also be accessed independently of our website at <http://rougepages.com>.

## LA. INTERFAITHS TOGETHER

The Baton Rouge Council cosponsored an October 4 state-wide La. Interfaiths Together Network meeting at the Louisiana Leadership Institute on Hooper Rd., attended by about 1,000 persons, including Gov. Blanco and many evacuees. A "Covenant to Rebuild Louisiana" was signed. People came from all over the state, and 40 pastors were present.

## BURNS BRIEF HISTORY OFFERED

Dr. Paul Burns has been able to boil down the history of the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations to just one page. You may contact him at 2137 Cedardale, Baton Rouge, LA 70808. To phone call 387-4755 or email at [pyburns@lycos.com](mailto:pyburns@lycos.com) to receive your free copy.

## SR. HELEN RETURNS TO B.R.

Sr. Helen Prejean, C.S.J., has returned to reside in Baton Rouge from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. She was born and raised in B.R. The headquarters of the Moratorium Campaign, of which she has been the

President, had moved last year to offices at the Catholic Student Center on the campus of Southern University.

## NCCJ BITES THE DUST

The local chapter of the National Conference of Community and Justice (formerly known as Nat. Conf. of Christians and Jews) has recently folded. In recent years NCCJ has been active in co-hosting a community prayer breakfast, conducting Brotherhood/Sisterhood school programs, training students to respond to disturbances, providing a summer camp, providing video trainings to children, and presenting an annual Brotherhood Award. Past recipients have included Council members.

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**B.R., LA 70808**

**Dues cover membership in  
LCHR.**

**See page 2 for non-BR residents.**

## **BATON ROUGE MUST KEEP BUS SERVICE**

Several members of the Baton Rouge Council attended an Aug. 15th hearing held by the Capital Area Transportation System (CATS) on a proposal to raise fares drastically and cut service severely because of a \$40,000 per year shortage in the CATS budget. The hearing room was crowded with bus-riders, mostly black, and several disabled, who would be hurt by this change. Nearly every comment opposed the change.

It was revealing that only three of the nine members of the CATS Board showed up to hear the concerns of their constituents. At the subsequent CATS Board meeting on Aug. 17th, the board voted 8-0 to raise fares and cut routes, but this was not a final action.

On Aug. 24th, the Metro-Council, after many pleas by those in the chamber, including Baton Rouge Human Relations Council President Marjorie Green, decided to postpone a budget cut in hopes that the needed \$40,000 could be found in the EBR Parish budget.

EBR provides only about \$25 per capita to the local bus service. New Orleans provides \$103 to mass transit and Austin, TX, where local business leaders looked in recent years for ideas to improve Baton Rouge, provides \$160.

Fueled by our concern for low-income persons, our Council has a long history of trying to establish a useful and well-operated bus system. The system, riddled

with politics and uncaring where the poor are concerned, has successfully resisted. Some think it is because our civic leaders, well-heeled white men, do not care about poor folks. Conspiracy theorists think it is because upper-income white folks in the suburbs don't want low-income blacks riding through or close to their neighborhoods.

Mayor-President Kip Holden has a chance to make history in Baton Rouge. Not one of the Baton Rouge mayors during the past 50 years adequately supported low-income persons. Mr. Holden can and should. Besides, with so many displaced New Orleans area residents here, the strain on Baton Rouge's transportation system calls for more mass transit, not less.

## **R.I.P.—EVA LEGARD**

Ms. Eva Legard died on May 7th, 2005 in Baton Rouge at the age of 80. Ms. Legard was retired from Southern University Registrar's Office. She is survived by her husband, Lawrence F. Legard and 10 children.

Ms. Legard was very active in promoting public education and served on the EBR Parish School Board. In 1986 she was the honored by BRCHR as recipient of the Humanitarian Award.



## **100 Black Women Join Advocacy Coalition**

Dick Haymaker, immediate Past President of the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations, announced that the Baton Rouge Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women has joined the Advocacy Coalition, a group of Baton Rouge organizations working for justice and better human relations. Other organizations which have joined the BRCHR in this coalition are the YWCA of Greater Baton Rouge, Working Interfaith Network of Greater Baton Rouge (WIN), Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues, Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice, TAE Community Builders, Equity/Baton Rouge, and Community Association for the Welfare of School Children (CASWC).

## **ELEVEN WOMEN HONORED**

Silver Magnolia Awards for leadership were given this fall to eleven women, including four members of the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations. They are Trudi Meyers, Virtle Jones, Eileen Armstrong, and Rupert Richardson. Also honored at the luncheon was Martha White, an activist in the 1950's Baton Rouge bus boycott. These Awards are given annually by the Women's Council of Greater Baton Rouge to women who have distinguished themselves in community service over the course of many years.



## **LIBERAL TALK RADIO**

After years of right-wing conservatives hosting Baton Rouge talk radio shows, WYNK 1380 AM, a Clear Channel Communications station, has opened their airwaves to well-known liberal humorist Al Franken. Clear Channel's owners tilt markedly to the right and have been at the forefront of lobbying for F.C.C. changes allowing corporate domination of the air-bands and markets. Apparently, they are willing to allow a bit more balance, at least more than has been the case for some time on radio.

## **OUTREACH TO EVACUEES**

A meeting was held Sept. 3rd of Baton Rouge groups wishing to ease racial tensions in the wake of massive evacuation of New Orleans area residents to Baton Rouge following hurricane Katrina. The local NAACP was receiving calls from evacuees concerning racial discrimination, and a meeting was quickly convened to put a plan in place to avert any further such problems. Included in this were representatives of Chambers of Commerce, EBR Parish school system, and the NAACP. Hopefully this quick response will make the evacuees feel more welcome.

**Current and historical information on our *active* Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations web site**

**[www.brchr.org](http://www.brchr.org)**

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