

The Washington Post

For the Poor, Sudden Celebrity

By Kevin Merida and Michael A. Fletcher

Washington Post Staff Writers

Thursday, September 22, 2005; A01

DALLAS -- All of a sudden the poor have emerged from the shadows of invisibility, lifted onto a temporary pedestal by natural disaster. Whether it is because of guilt, pity or the nation's generosity in times of crisis, those who lost everything -- many of whom had little to begin with -- find themselves in a strange wonderland of recognition.



Melanie Burford -- Dallas Morning News
Physician Jarod Root, center, and nurse Myeshia Westbrooks talk to evacuee Bless Harris, 5, at a Dallas clinic.

The destitute people sent fleeing by Katrina have been offered free housing, free clothing, free cars, free toys, special admission to universities and preferential job treatment. Athletes come to *them*, bestowing jerseys and autographs. Entertainers sing for them, and Bennigan's restaurants here and in Houston announced Katrina's kids could eat without paying for a while.

This is what it's like for the celebrity poor, a new subculture created by Hurricane Katrina.

Chris Lawrence, 49, who spent five days on a New Orleans overpass, is not sure what it all means. Mostly, he sits still in a Dallas shelter and reads the Bible. Describing himself as bone-tired after a life of working two jobs in New Orleans, he figures he's blessed just to be alive. The outpouring of kindness by Texans has restored his belief in compassion. "I had lost faith in humanity," he said.

How far this compassion should extend -- and what it should look like over time -- is looming as the next great social policy debate. What began as a response to the most devastating hurricane in the country's history is segueing to a grander discussion about the treatment of those who live on the margins. Will the Chris Lawrences now be able to improve their lives? Or will they return to their previous status as forgotten Americans with little hold on the attention or sympathies of politicians? And what of those already on the edge of poverty -- or worse -- who do not share the celebrityhood of those displaced by the ravaging floods of Katrina?

"People ignore the problem of poverty, then every once in a while something catastrophic happens. We talk about it, then we forget about it."

-- Alan Curtis

Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation

These questions are now confronting President Bush -- and the rest of political Washington. In the early days of the crisis, Bush was beset by criticism that he had been insensitive to the black and destitute. But lately, he has been speaking to them. During a prayer service for Katrina's victims at the National Cathedral in Washington on Friday, Bush said the nation must grapple with the entrenched problems of poverty.

"Americans of every race and religion were touched by this storm; yet some of the greatest hardship fell upon citizens already facing lives of struggle: the elderly, the vulnerable and the poor," Bush said. "And this poverty has roots in generations of segregation and discrimination that closed many doors of opportunity. As we clear away the debris of a hurricane, let us also clear away the legacy of inequality."

Some found Bush's words reassuring. Others worried that they would not resonate far into the future. "New Orleans is sort of like South Central [Los Angeles]," said **Alan Curtis**, president of the **Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation**, a Washington nonprofit that funds anti-poverty programs. "People ignore the problem of poverty, then every once in a while something catastrophic happens. We talk about it, then we forget about it."

In his plan to rebuild the Gulf Coast, Bush has called for tax breaks to encourage small- and minority-business development and individual accounts of as much as \$5,000 to help storm victims with job training, transportation, child care and other needs. He proposed that the federal government give poor victims its unused property, including foreclosed homes and vacant lots on which they could build their houses.

Democrats have their own big ideas. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (Mass.) has proposed a Gulf Coast Regional Redevelopment Authority, modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority, which was created during the New Deal era to address issues from flood control to power production to malaria prevention. Kennedy's Gulf Coast version would fund large education, health and job training initiatives while overseeing rebuilding in the region.

The sense that Democrats have controlled the landscape on poverty and race is not lost on Republican stalwarts who hope their party doesn't miss an opportunity. Ronald Reagan's description in 1976 of the Chicago "welfare queen" who drives a Cadillac lives on as a tale of infamy, remembered by African Americans and anti-poverty advocates as crucial in fueling the perception that blacks were exploiting the welfare system.

"There really has not been a strong Republican message to either the poor or the African American community at large," said Jack Kemp, a former housing secretary and standard-bearer for Republican ideas to fight poverty.

Added former GOP House speaker Newt Gingrich: "This is one of the most important moments in modern history, and in the next three to four weeks we will find out if the party is ready and able to govern."

Extending an Ambivalent Hand

The nation has long been ambivalent toward the poor. The humanitarian instinct to help those in dire straits is often constrained by a lurking feeling that the needy are responsible for their own bad circumstances.

"This country was founded on a very strong work ethic, which has created this sense that if you work hard in America, you get ahead," said Rebecca M. Blank, dean of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan. "But not far from that is the idea that if you don't get ahead, you must not be working hard."

David K. Shipler, in his book "The Working Poor," explains the complexity of the struggle to get ahead: "Breaking away and moving a comfortable distance from poverty seems to require a perfect lineup of favorable conditions. A set of skills, a good starting wage, and a job with the likelihood of promotion are prerequisites. But so are clarity of purpose, courageous self-esteem, a lack of substantial debt, the freedom from illness or addiction, a functional family, a network of upstanding friends, and the right help from private or governmental agencies. Any gap in that array is an entry point for trouble, because being poor means being unprotected."

When severe floods struck the lower Mississippi River in 1927, leaving more than 700,000 Delta residents homeless, those dirt-poor victims -- nearly half of whom were black -- received no federal aid. The government simply was not in the business of helping the poor.

It wasn't until nearly a decade later that the first widescale effort to attack poverty was launched with enactment of Social Security, a welfare program for destitute widows and unemployment insurance. Those initiatives were followed by a housing program and later free school lunches, a response to the alarmingly poor nutrition among many World War II recruits. The Great Society efforts of the 1960s and their progeny in the 1970s broadened educational and housing assistance while expanding the nation's safety net with health care programs, food stamps and disability insurance. But since the 1996 passage of national welfare legislation, tax credits have become among the government's biggest vehicles for helping the poor.

Excluding Social Security, congressional researchers say there are more than 80 poverty-related programs, which in 2003 cost \$522 billion. Yet despite those programs, 37 million Americans -- 12.7 percent of the population -- continue to live in poverty, and the rates are higher in the states hit hardest by Katrina: 16.7 percent in Louisiana, 17 percent in Alabama and 18.6 percent in Mississippi.

In New Orleans, 27.9 percent of the residents are below the federal poverty line -- \$15,000 a year for a family of three, a measure that only begins to capture the deprivation in a city where in 2000, more than one in five households reported incomes of less than \$10,000 per year.

Competing for Jobs and Attention

Some who have fled the Big Easy, where the livin' ain't always easy, are wondering what will become of them. Will they make it?

Ebony Turner, a New Orleans health technician, struggled to keep her optimism but frustration had her near tears. She was staying at a temporary shelter -- a Motel 6 -- in Lewisville, Tex., which has a black population of 7 percent and is 22 miles from downtown Dallas. Officials from federal, state and private agencies were set up at the Dallas Convention Center to help her access the services she needed, but Turner was having a difficult time connecting her needs with their suggestions.

She was told she could get food stamps. "But, Miss," Turner pleaded, "where are we going to cook the food? We're in a shelter." She was told she

could get unemployment benefits, that a letter could be mailed to her in two weeks. "Miss, where are you going to send the letter when I don't have an address?" She was told she was eligible for a low-interest federal loan. "Miss, how am I going to pay it back to you? I don't have nothing."

She was told the Salvation Army could provide clothes for her son, a ninth-grader who has a 40-inch waist and wears a size 12 1/2 shoe. The Salvation Army didn't have clothes that fit him, she already knew, and now she was at her wit's end.

"I'm not sending my child to school in flip-flops," she said angrily. "I'd rather go live in swampland than send my kid to school in flip-flops. Where is the government right now? I don't know what to do."

This same sense of demoralization is heard by the down-and-out who are not Katrina celebrities. They have watched from the background as the hurricane's victims have been shuttled to the front of the help lines. They wonder: After Katrina's survivors are taken care of, will there be anything left for us?

This anxiety was starkly displayed at a Dallas job fair last week. The plan was to hold the fair at a local community college with 30 employers manning booths. But in the hurricane's wake, the event was switched to the Dallas Convention Center and it grew to 225 employers -- so many wanted to take part that some companies had to be turned away.

Technically, the job fair was open to anyone in search of work. But employers' soft hearts were reserved for the Gulf Coast's displaced residents. For recruiters, the requirement for admission was that they have actual jobs to hand out right away. To emphasize that point, each recruiter was given a whistle to blow when someone was hired.

Jennifer Carter, who had been a data-entry technician for the New Orleans police department, didn't realize the fair was open to non-Katrina survivors until she noticed the nicely tailored Nora Gonzalez assert herself at the hiring table of a personnel services company. According to Carter, Gonzalez jumped in front of her, saying, "Well, I'm from Texas, this is my résumé." Fumed Carter: "They should give us an opportunity because we have nothing."

Told of Carter's perspective, Gonzalez seemed surprised. Her friend, Keyla Robinson, who was looking for clerical work, chimed in: "Why should you feel guilty? We're in need, too."

That sentiment was echoed during interviews at the job fair, as hardship stories were told by those whose lives had come unglued by disasters of a different kind.

Keisha Sims, 29, had been an order clerk at a Dallas barbecue joint until her son was partially paralyzed when he fell off the monkey bars at a day care center. She took off two years to care for him but needed to return to work. She wound up at the 7-Eleven booth, where the hiring whistle was screeching, hoping to land a job selling Slurpees.

Sims was despondent. She had just heard from her sister, who called crying because she had been bumped from an apartment she had been approved for. Again, Katrina benevolence. "I feel like this: It's okay to help people," said Sims. "But it's like they went above and beyond to help them."

Melvin Hewitt understands this. The union representative from the Gentilly area of New Orleans recounted what he had seen outside of Reunion Arena, which had been serving as a downtown shelter in Dallas. A man offered Hewitt's brother a crisp bill, only to ask for it back when he realized it was \$10. The man apologized, saying he hadn't meant to give the Katrina survivor such a small amount. He then pulled a \$100 bill from his pocket.

"They show us love," Hewitt remarked, still amazed by that act of generosity. "Much, much love."

Fletcher reported from Washington. Staff writer Jonathan Weisman and research editor Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.

© 2005 The Washington Post Company