



2009-Perry-02 Winter

Technical *Brief*

Creativity, Innovation, and Resilience in Mississippi: Katrina, the Tragedy that Binds

by LeKesha L. Perry, Research Associate I



Satellite view of Hurricane Katrina as the storm's eye passes over Pearlington, Waveland, Bay St. Louis and Pass Christian, Mississippi on August 29, 2005.

Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/48135670@N00/97951579/>

Introduction

There are some days that linger, for those days are the best days you could have ever imagined, or they are those days that devastation, chaos, and tears reign—the thought of moving forward seemed so foreign. Well, Mississippi has had her days: good, bad, ugly, and redemptive. Perhaps not to the same degree as September 11, 2001, but for us Mississippians, August 29, 2005 is a day that is etched in infamy. Hurricane Katrina made its grand entrance to the Mississippi Gulf Coast and summarily changed the course of our history.

The mistakes made as a result of Katrina are many; so are the lessons learned. Perhaps one of the most difficult lessons to learn was the lesson of vulnerability – how vulnerable we are as a government and as individuals. Mississippians had come to appreciate and love our office view of our long and peaceful shoreline, or our condos on the water. And then came devastation and destruction of a magnitude with which we were unfamiliar: Katrina. Older Mississippians remembered Camille, in 1969. Those older still remembered the '47 hurricane. Neither – nor any hurricane reaching land in the United States prior to August 29, 2005 – had the force, the width, or the depth of Katrina.

So now our dreams are different. Before we build our dream home on the shore, we hesitate. We understand disaster in a way that the veteran understands combat.

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Progress?

We, too, learned that our government, the protector of citizens, is just as vulnerable as her citizens are. When I speak of government, I mean all forms—local, state, and federal. This was evident with how Louisiana responded to the disaster. Mississippi, too, had her problems, namely, rebuilding from fragments where cities once stood, and let us not forget the economic impact the state incurred with the loss of the casinos and tourism. And even today, many remain in the temporary housing provided by FEMA. So, when we measure the progress Mississippi has made since that ill-fated day, what are we basing this progress on? What is considered progress?



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/48135670@N00/1267282815/>

The Biloxi-Ocean Springs Bridge— post-Katrina and rebuilt and open, linking the community



Source: http://ishare.wlox.com/vmix_hosted_apps/p/media?id=2436274&item_index=223&all=1&sort=NULL



Of course, progress can be viewed in the collective sense or on an individual basis. I am not so sure that for those who are awaiting housing and job assistance that progress is all that evident. But for some, progress -- governmental progress -- was very apparent with the reopening of the Biloxi-Ocean Springs Bridge in late 2007. Essentially by reopening the bridge, it provided the coastal area with something that had been lacking since Katrina, a sense of unity. According to an editorial piece from a Coast news outlet, “for the first time in over two years the entire coast will be linked again as one community. Something we all should be thankful for.”

Picking up the Pieces

In the face of tragedy, we turned to our elected leaders to help its citizens to regain some sense of normalcy. What Katrina displayed to us all—Mississippians and the rest of the United States—is that as prepared as we may think we are, we truly will not know what we are faced with until tragedy strikes. What Mississippi learned about herself is that we are a resilient people, a people of various experiences and backgrounds. In the aftermath of Katrina, Mississippians revealed that we are willing to put aside our differences, our struggles, to make for a better and brighter Mississippi.

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It is difficult and unfair to say that Mississippi owes her resurgence to one particular organization or effort. Mississippi owes her progress to a collaboration of agencies, institutions, organizations, and individuals. The uniqueness of Mississippi is that through the face of tragedy, somehow, we united as one. This uniqueness is what separates Mississippi from most states. Fortunately, through or in spite of our differences, we are still Mississippi.

The road to recovery has not been easy and will not be. This is not up for debate. It is no secret that Mississippi is a state riddled with poverty, large number of high school drop-outs, and a poor health care system available to those of low or fixed incomes.

But the Governor and the people of Mississippi had a dream, and this dream became a journey. The journey to moving Mississippi toward a better state was a goal pre-Katrina. If there is to be a blessing regarding Katrina, the blessing in this disguise shifts Mississippi into a new direction. This new direction now uses creativity and innovation to address the issues pre- and post-Katrina. One organization that has taken on this task is the Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC).



Bill Holland (right) and shipwright Jim Mowery in front of a boat under construction in Holland's boatyard.

Photo by Tom Rankin



McArthur Chism of Water Valley working his signature item: a bottle cap birdhouse.



Manuel "Cucho" Gonzalez
Afro-Cuban Percussionist &
Drummer, Richland

Restoring the Soul of Mississippi

Who would have thought that the MAC would serve as an essential organization in the aftermath of Katrina? Not many. Did anyone envision that through art, a state could explore its future, reclaim its past, and express its present? Those affected by the greatest natural disaster to hit these United States sustained a great deal of loss— loss of income, jobs, lives, homes. So what can an arts-based agency provide the citizens of Mississippi? In a word: restoration.

The images of the Gulf Coast made all of Mississippi and America take notice, stop and pause. Katrina not only took away our loved ones, homes, and jobs, it took a piece of our history with it. At times, I have to look at the pictures just to remind myself that what I saw was very real. This was no war zone far away, this was my home, and this was my Mississippi. If it were not for this arts-based agency and its ability to seize the opportunity to move Mississippi past the pain, the heartache and despair, our prized possessions, artists of all kinds and heritage would have been washed away in the rubble. Consequently, recovery—both state and of the arts—was something that Executive Director Malcolm White believed that “the hope... cannot be lost or blown away. Reweaving the massive fabric of arts, music, food, and celebration that constitutes the heart and soul of our coastal area is an overwhelming project...” that must be included in the restoration of Mississippi “because the traditions and customs of several lifetimes will be washed away as well.”

“No Longer Art for Art Sake”

The first step in moving Mississippi forward was by lobbying the Small Business Administration to recognize individual artists as businesses. This, on the face seems like a small, insignificant task; however, it showed that art is no longer for “art’s sake...” The arts are more significant than mere enjoyment, arts are more essential now than before, as the arts are now tied to economic development, education and quality of life issues. Simply put, the arts are an effective vehicle for moving Mississippi forward.

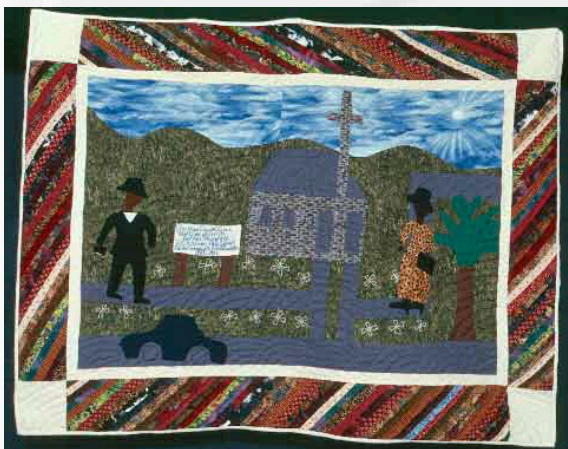
MAC’s redefined role post-Katrina is clearly illustrated in its Strategic Directions 2008-2012 publication. On the cover it reads “Charting a course for the future...” Its vision remains “to support and celebrate Mississippi’s creative spirit.” Consequently, as personal responsibility in the wake of Katrina also shifted Mississippi’s sense of renewal for both artisans and non-artisans alike, we see MAC shifting the agency from more of a stimulating and encouraging based agency to one that incorporates a more hands on approach to addressing the issues that continue to plague Mississippi pre- and post-Katrina.

In its annual report released in 2004, there were six objectives identified as a means “to increase cultural participation opportunities across Mississippi and to further define and celebrate the public



“Mundal Grove Church.” This quilt depicts when the church was first organized in Port Gibson, between 1868 and 1887. The quilt was made as part of the Port Gibson Bicentennial Art Project in 2003.

Photo by David Crosby



“Christian Chapel Church.” This quilt depicts when the Christian Chapel Church when it first moved to town in the late 1800s. The quilt was made as part of the Port Gibson Bicentennial Art Project in 2003.

Photo by David Crosby



Quilter Gustina Atlas of Port Gibson

Photo by Beth Batton

Source: http://www.arts.state.ms.us/folklife/artist.php?dirname=atlas_gustina

value of the work carried out by our constituents.” These objectives included:

- Support development of Mississippi communities through the arts;
- Improve the capacity and stability of Mississippi’s art industry;
- Strengthen education in and through the arts;
- Increase knowledge of and pride in Mississippi arts and culture;
- Recognize and encourage Mississippi artists; and
- Sustain the Mississippi Arts Commission’s administrative effectiveness.

In the publication, we also find that MAC sought to:

- Foster networks of local leaders, artists of all disciplines, arts volunteers, and patrons;
- Provide training in arts management, arts education planning, arts facilities planning, and community wide cultural planning; and
- Promote broad-based public awareness of the importance of the arts in education and community life.

In its Strategic Directions 2008-2012 publication, the existing strategic plan was reconsidered. Why? A word: Katrina. White noted that “no matter where we looked or who we talked to, we could never get very far from the recent reality of August 29, 2005... It was hard to ignore the largest and most damaging natural disaster... at last, [we] found a collective voice to address the procedures for dealing with the possibilities of future disaster and the concept of emergency preparedness... Katrina has been our manifest distraction and will be our responsibility for the duration of this document designed to guide us over the next five years.”

More than “just a painting on the wall, though we’re that too!”

For White, Mississippi is now beginning to tell all of her story. This story is more than “just a painting on the wall, though we’re that too!” This story focuses on MAC now encouraging and stimulating Mississippi to see art through a far different lens than ever before. Particularly, he indicates that the arts have been “othered” – diminished in significance -- to the point that anything art related is not considered serious. This message could not have been more apparent than in our public schools. Eliminating art from the classrooms essentially eliminated art from our consciousness. What I mean is that all that we do—from our language, to what we eat, to writing, communication, to drawing and painting, music, singing, dancing, and the list continues—by removing these activities from the category of “the arts”, we simply see these actions as individual talents that are unrelated to the arts.

Where Rivers of Money Flow

In seeking to return to business as usual after Katrina, MAC had to contend with the reality that the agency did not have a rainy day fund. As a result of the realities Katrina left behind, MAC's directors and White believed that emphasis on art recovery would allow the agency and the state to begin rebuilding one story at a time. This step by step restoration would at times mimic private organizations. MAC turned to for-profit principles as a measure to build its fiscal reserves and endowment. According to a National Endowment for the Arts 2006 article, White believed that the proactive role MAC assumed following Katrina demonstrated that "the arts must have a seat at the table, not simply hang on the wall or stand in the corner, because the arts are critical to economic development and the regrowth of the area."



M.B. Green of Louin playing one of his custom made banjos. *

The challenge for MAC is to be taken seriously by those who traditionally do not consider themselves the artsy type. Lobbying the SBA to recognize artists as individual businessmen and women was a crucial step in that direction. Often times we become enamored with results, and not so much at the journey for which we have taken to arrive at said result. MAC's former Director of Grants and Special Initiatives, Judi Pulliam, stated that the agency has to become more efficient in showing the flow of money, essentially "having the necessary information to show where the money goes." Quantifying the impact that the arts have on our livelihood can be a difficult task, especially when justifying why the agency should receive an increase in appropriated state funds. When addressing the needs of Mississippi, it cannot be stressed enough that our very essence is art and to attach a numerical value on it may seem unfair, but necessary. Therefore, we must observe the agency's fiscal responsibility. If MAC can provide more with a considerable less than desirable budget, to which Governor Haley Barbour recognized that MAC "squeezes every federal, state and private dollar to serve over 1.6 million individuals," then quantifying the impact of this agency should be measured by examining the jobs it has helped to create, schools that have been improved because of the Whole Schools Initiative, continued community development and that value-laden and ephemeral quality— quality of life.



Moss Point saxophonist Charles Fairley. *

Top photo by Scott Barretta for the Mississippi Arts Commission



Richard Kwaku Amoah African Woodcarver, Ellisville *

Seeing Us Through: Again?

MAC has the capability and resources to see Mississippi and her beloved residents through these difficult times. Several states have infused the arts with public policy as a means to stimulate local economies by investing in one of the greatest natural resources: human ingenuity. Maryland sought to capitalize on this ingenuity when it became the first state to actively implement arts based public policy to stimulate local economies. With these arts and entertainment districts, Maryland's public policy objective was to attract more mixed commercial use in these areas. Particularly in the Cumberland District, a wide net was cast to bring in the best and brightest artists to integrate, learn, inspire, and lead the revitalization of vacated properties. The recruitment of local artists as well as those from other regions forged a common purpose thus developing a shared experience—and this shared experience brought the prospect of a better America to those who once thought the dream eluded them. Not

* Source: <http://www.arts.state.ms.us/folklife/artist>

just a cliché, the American dream is a reality, and for many the reality is that even in the worst conditions, there is a better day to be had.

Executive Director of the Allegheny Arts Council and Coordinator of the Cumberland Arts and Entertainment District, Andrew Vick believes that “even in challenging financial times, an investment in the arts pays major dividends.” Though his comment occurred quite some time before the financial hard times we are experiencing now, Vick’s comments are somewhat prophetic. Mississippi, like many other states, is at a crossroads. Tracking exactly where the money goes has never been more important. President Barack Obama calls our current fiscal crisis “unprecedented” to which “unprecedented action” is required. In order to cover a shortfall in revenue, Governor Barbour has called for \$200 million reduction of the current budget. The harsh financial times leave MAC especially vulnerable, and an already tight budget has just become even tighter. Trimming MAC’s budget in this current climate is a difficult decision to make, nonetheless, because of its recent history, here is an alternative to Mississippi’s economic woes. Invest more, broaden our horizon, and allow the arts to be completely integrated to help restore Mississippi once more. The mood of Mississippi has been tempered, the spirit weakened, but the will has not been broken. MAC has the ability to stand as one of the leaders in turning our seemingly dismal future around. In actuality, if we can move on from the greatest natural destruction, Mississippi and MAC have the ability to utilize innovative methods to continue to leave an indelible mark on this state. In the face of adversity, White seems more resolute now than ever.



Mario Garcia, Leopoldo Villegas, and Lalo Herrera (l-r) perform as part of the weekly Spanish Mass at Our Lady of Fatima in Biloxi. *

Photo by Chris Goertzen for the Mississippi Arts Commission

★ **Reweaving the massive fabric of arts, music, food, and celebration that constitutes the heart and soul of our coastal area is an overwhelming project... that must be included in the restoration of Mississippi...**

For White, though the current economic climate is not ideal, MAC is just as strong and significant during these dark times. The recent 5 percent budget cut imposed by the state resulted in administrative reductions, but not programming. White believes that because both federal and state revenues have slowed, this does not spell a great demise for the agency. Actually, he remains confident in the agency’s ability to call on private donations, partnerships, and other collaborations to continue providing grants and other support. In the face of the cuts and slowed revenues, White says “we need to learn to do with less, learn to be more lean and mean... the whole goal is not reduce the money funded out.” Adversity is no stranger to the agency, and now is no different than before. White is conscious that some adjustments must be made for the “arts suffer along with everyone else... we need to work harder to continue to support the arts and education, but it’s early. It’s not an overnight thing, but we are prepared.”



Crawfish ready to be boiled on the deck of Lady of the Sea Boat1. *

Recommendations for Building for a Better and Brighter Future

Katrina left an indelible mark, one for the record books, in fact. Collectively, Mississippi is slowly returning, carving out its unique identity following the decimation of the coastal areas. As White mentioned, Mississippi must tell her story, and we now must include Katrina in this anthology. This anthology is not

pretty; at times, it is not enjoyable, but it is Mississippi. Moving Mississippi forward requires creativity, innovation and resiliency. It requires an acceptance of the good and the bad, the artistic and the antithesis of art – the ugly stain of segregation and racism. The state is not rich in financial resources, but rich in its cultural heritage. MAC has assumed a distinctive responsibility; it now realizes that Mississippi’s future depends on how we connect its ties with this rich cultural heritage.

Financing the many goals and objectives that MAC has set forth is not an easy task. Governor Barbour has realized that MAC’s influence should not be curbed, but that does not mean that the agency has a blank check to work with. The agency is responsible for awarding grants to individuals as an aim “at recognizing and encouraging Mississippi artists.” Furthermore, MAC’s effort to “renovate and repair existing cultural facilities through the agency’s Building Fund for the Arts Initiative” is yet another example of how Mississippi benefits from the extraordinary work of this small organization.

Building towards a better future requires MAC to continue to communicate with other organizations to see that MAC’s goals and objectives come to fruition. Mississippi’s story must be told, but as of now this story is being told in fragments. As a first step following Katrina, MAC formed an alliance with three of the state’s cultural agencies—the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the Mississippi Library Commission, and the Mississippi Humanities Council—to plan The Cultural Charette: Conversations on Coast Community Life. Though this was a two-day event in response to the events of Hurricane Katrina, it would benefit the state and Mississippians if these organizations could form a more permanent alliance to develop a coherent cultural heritage program, which includes but not limited to tourism, improving community relations, and showcasing Mississippi’s past and present artists, while recruiting artists from all regions to come share in the Mississippi experience.

Second, MAC has to determine how it will show the flow of money, as Pulliam stated. Because we are a people driven by results, MAC must be able to show the financial implications of having said amount of dollars and how far this said amount can go to benefit Mississippians. Furthermore, MAC’s vision must be bought by the legislators, thereby specifically attaching art to education and economic development, allowing MAC to push for more financial assistance. However, the very nature that the arts are at times considered an afterthought leaves the agency susceptible to tighter budgets. Therefore, MAC must continue to deepen its ties with governmental and private organizations as a means to supplement budgetary restrictions.

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Concluding Thoughts

At the turn of the new year, we are faced with some difficult decisions and challenges. The arts were a significant catalyst in restoring Mississippi after the greatest disaster to hit these shores. The arts too should be vital as we turn Mississippi back from perhaps the toughest economic times my generation has seen. The arts continue to keep our hope and faith in a new day alive. Just recently, Biloxi became the talk of many in the entertainment industry when it announced some of its coming attractions for the upcoming year. Taylor



Community Traditions:
The Blessing of the Fleet Boat Ceremony, Biloxi Shrimp trawler Sammy Lou approaches the blessing boat. *



Driskill Mountain Bluegrass Band (Bay St. Louis) performing at the Bluegrass on the Creek Festival, Tylertown, May 2005. *

Swift. Jessica Simpson. Queen Latifah. LeeAnn Rimes. The National Governor’s Association Conference (with the possibility that Sarah Palin would attend). By bringing in some of the brightest stars, both of the entertainment and political worlds, is a creative economy for Mississippi, albeit an unintentional one—much like following the events of Katrina. MAC has demonstrated its ability to get Mississippi back to its strengths, and we should return to this place again.

Mississippi’s story is not static; it is fluid. That being said, Mississippi’s story must be told by those who live and breathe everything Mississippi. Mississippians need to feel that we all have a shared history. By developing an advertising and marketing

scheme to relay this mantra, particularly if images of our shared history are displayed in subtle ways that allows for art to return to our consciousness, we should see our story coming into clear view.

* Source: <http://www.arts.state.ms.us/folklife/artist>

About the Author



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Lydia Quarles is a Senior Policy Analyst at the John C. Stennis Institute of Government, Mississippi State University. She received her Juris Doctorate in 1975 from Cumberland School of Law, Samford University, and her MA and BA from Mississippi University for Women, in 1972 and 1971 respectively, in political science and communication. After over a dozen years in the private practice of law in Alabama and Mississippi, she joined the Mississippi Workers' Compensation Commission as an Administrative Judge in 1993. Eight years later, in 2001, she was appointed Commissioner of the agency. In 2006, she resigned to join the Stennis Institute.

Quarles remains active in bar work, and currently chairs the Women in the Profession Committee, a standing committee of the Mississippi Bar. She also serves as co-chair of the Mississippi Supreme Court’s “Gender Fairness Implementation Study Committee” and acts as the Chief Operating Officer of the Workers’ Compensation Section of the Mississippi Bar. She is a fellow of the Mississippi Bar Foundation, a recipient of the Mississippi Bar’s Distinguished Service Award, a member of the Mississippi School for Math and Science Foundation Board and a member of the MUW Alumni Board. Quarles was recently honored by the American Bar Association’s Administrative Law and Regulatory Practice Section, receiving the Mary C. Lawton Award for lasting contributions to the Mississippi Workers’ Compensation Commission in the areas of alternative dispute resolution and access for Hispanic workers. In 2004, Quarles was named one of Mississippi’s 50 Leading Business Women by the Mississippi Business Journal; the Journal recognized her service to the State as a Commissioner as well as entrepreneurial skills developed in her property management business in Starkville, Spruill Property Management, LLC.

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Jones has marketing management and consulting experience in several business sectors including: *Engineering* environmental, civil (site, transportation and aviation), structural, and mechanical, electrical and plumbing (MEP); *Architecture* commercial and residential development, interior design, healthcare, education, corrections, and landscape architecture; *Construction* commercial and residential development; *Military* marketing support for U.S. Air Force aeropropulsion, aerodynamic ground testing, and environmental projects; and *Real Estate* property listing, client relations, and advertising. Her interests include urban and regional planning, affordable housing, green space design and historical preservation, economic and workforce development, and small business initiatives.

About the Institute



Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to “plow a straight furrow to the end of the row,” John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

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