



Katrina Reflections

By CEO Keith Liederman, Ph.D.

Twenty years ago, as my wife Luanne, daughter Camille, and I evacuated ahead of Hurricane Katrina, I could not have imagined the devastation to come—or the way our city, and our organization, would be forever changed. We thought it might be days, maybe a week, before returning home, as we had during past storms. But nothing could have prepared us for what came next.

The events unfolded just a short 24 hours later right before our eyes, on our television screens, and our hearts broke. To the rest of the world, it probably seemed like a scary movie, but not to those of us from Southeast Louisiana and the Gulf Coast. We watched as our community was being destroyed and so many of our neighbors were suffering and dying, all of it totally incomprehensible, knowing we were forever changed and our future was uncertain.

Returning to the city in late September, just one month after the storm, felt unreal. There were heavily armed National Guard and NOPD units at all entry points and they were not letting everyone in. I remember what got my family and me through – my Kingsley House staff identification card. Our community recognized us and needed us. We had always been there for the people of New Orleans. But, how in the world were we? Only 30 agency staff members were able to return to the agency by early October (out of the 110 staff we had before the storm). Our campus sustained more than \$4 million dollars in damages and we could only occupy less than half of our facilities, but we went to work anyway. Families needed us and that compelled us to move forward.

In October 2005, with extraordinary guidance, support and encouragement from our Board of Directors, we launched the region's first Resettlement and Recovery Center to help families in their efforts to recover and rebuild. We provided counseling, helped people replace missing vital documents and connected them to available public and private resources in the community.

That November, we resumed operations of our preschool and Adult Services programs, **the first early learning and adult day care facilities in the city to reopen after the storm.** Our gymnasium, offices, and conference rooms were transformed into early learning classrooms to meet the needs of returning families, while the preschool building began undergoing major repairs. We even provided care on Saturdays for children and youth and medically fragile adults and seniors, so families could take care of storm-related business.

What made this possible were our staff—the true unsung heroes of our recovery. They constantly went above and beyond, even while immersed in their own healing and rebuilding. Their sacrifice, along with the steadfast support and sacrifices of

their families (**thank you, Luanne and Camille, for being my rock!**), remains one of the most inspiring parts of this journey.

That December, we joined with fellow social services agencies, private foundation partners, United Way of Southeast LA and the State of Louisiana to **form the Community Based Services Network** to pool our scarce resources and effectively work together to meet the needs of tens of thousands of families throughout our recovering region. It was some of the hardest times we had ever faced, but the sense of community was stronger than ever.

Reflecting back 20 years later, this is what I remember most, and what I believe we showed the world about New Orleans and Southeast Louisiana. We have a deep and abiding love for our people, our city and our region. Everyone came together. Our sense of civic pride, commitment, and community are, I believe, the strongest in the nation.

While much has changed over these past two decades and we still face many challenges, I remain confident we can overcome them.

If Katrina taught us anything, it is that we are resilient, we are determined, and we can get through anything when we work together as a community.