

Jesuit High in New Orleans rises from the floodwaters



Mike Giambelluca, principal of Jesuit High in New Orleans, works the crowd of returning students this January. He waited out Katrina at the school, which ended up taking five feet of water (right). He was evacuated to Dallas but came back in October to help shoulder the herculean task of getting the school back on its feet.

Holding It Together

by Julie Bourbon
photos by Harold Baquet



In a teeming restaurant in West End New Orleans, a whiff of cigarette smoke in the air, Mike Giambelluca scans the crowd to estimate the wait time for lunch. It is Monday, which means red beans and rice, and the food at Russell's is particularly good. But that doesn't fully explain the overflowing parking lot in this otherwise ravaged neighborhood. In a city famous for its restaurants, fewer than half have reopened, and Russell's is one of them, so everybody who's here is here. Welcome to the new normal of post-Katrina life.

Giambelluca, the principal of Jesuit High School, greets the principal of Mt. Carmel, one of the city's Catholic girls' high schools, with a kiss on the cheek. Both schools are reopening in a few weeks, and her face registers the same fatigued, bemused grin that Giambelluca wears along with his blue Jesuit fleece. Although it's January, it is almost too hot to be wearing it, but this is a city where the question

"Where'd you go to school?" means high school, not college, and the fleece is a marker.

In this case, the wearer is also an alum ('82), and the restaurant is owned by the parents of one of his students. That explains the complimentary (and exemplary)

bread pudding for dessert and why Giambelluca knows the waiter, the teenage girl behind the counter, and the fellow coming in the door as we are leaving. In New Orleans, being a native means something, and everyone is met with kisses or great

big handshakes and a quick inventory of how they've fared since the storm.

Neighborhoods in ruins

The drive from Jesuit High to Russell's and back takes us through devastated neighborhoods. Giambelluca winds his way along dusty streets lined with flooded-out cars and strangely empty houses, some tilting at crazy angles, others completely collapsed, one resting kitty-corner on its foundation, one in the middle of the road. He stops in front of his own house—what used to be his house—which he and his new bride bought three months before the storm. Still standing, with X's quaintly taped across the front windows, it looks like it was a happy home before it filled up with water, but he doesn't dwell on it and, after a pause for a photo, drives on. Giambelluca is a man with things to do, and dwelling is not one of them. Equal parts cheerfulness and pragmatism, he has a school to run.

Today, in a city with less than half the population it had at the height of a storm-filled summer, Giambelluca says people are now gauging time according to which hurricane hit—Betsy, Camille, Ivan, Katrina. The last, of course, is the one they'll never forget, the one that filled Jesuit High with more than five feet of dirty water, sending a small team of stalwarts—Giambelluca, his wife, and nine others—scrambling to the school's second floor. They slept in classrooms and teachers' lounges to wait out the storm and watch the water rise as high as the ninth step, past the landing, over the desks, setting vending machines adrift like buoys. They had to wade to the kitchen on the first floor to float food and drinks down the hallway to the stairs and drag them up to where the people were.

Providentially, after years of talking about it, Jesuit purchased a generator the size of a small truck last



summer and mounted it on the roof. It would keep them hooked up to air conditioning, the news, and the kitchen in the sixth-floor Jesuit residence. It would also light the school up like a star in the night. Which is why the original eleven were joined, unexpectedly, by about 50 neighbors who arrived on boats in the predawn hours the day after the floodwaters came. Some had guns and had spent the previous night on their rooftops. All of them were scared and hungry. The flood was biblical. Jesuit High and those inside survived. The neighborhood and much of the city didn't.

"I thought at first we'd miss a week of school," says Giambelluca, who has been principal for five years. Like everyone else, he packed enough for a few days away from home. "We couldn't even feel the storm, that's how well built the school is," Giambelluca remembers. Having survived the lashing wind and rain, they thought they'd seen the worst of it. They hadn't.

They didn't know at first that the levees had broken. "Once it was a foot deep, I realized there was something wrong," says Giambelluca.

The storm hit Sunday night, but the Jesuit refugees were floated to buses waiting on the highway only on Wednesday. "When we were leaving that day on the boat, I had no idea whether the school was going to reopen," Giambelluca remembers.

Diaspora

The rest, as they say, is history. Epic flooding in 80 percent of the city displaced the entire population, at least temporarily. Jesuit's faculty, staff, and students ended up spread throughout the region and the country, part of the New Orleans diaspora that continues to this day. More than 400 students finished the semester at Strake Jesuit College Prep in Houston, about 80 at Jesuit College Prep in Dallas, where Giambelluca remained until the end of September.

When he returned to New Orleans, Giambelluca set up shop at St. Martin's Episcopal School in Metairie, just outside New Orleans, in a neighborhood that escaped flooding. Jesuit students who hadn't enrolled anywhere and were still in the metropolitan area—about 800 in total—started their school day in late afternoon, after St. Martin students finished theirs. Giambelluca came to enjoy a school schedule that allowed him to sleep in and exercise in the morning. He and the gym have become strangers again of late.

In all, almost three-quarters of his students were at other Jesuit high schools as far away as Chicago and Towson, Maryland. Giambelluca estimates that all but about 175 of 1,100 have returned for the spring semester, which started January 23. Of 147 faculty and staff, 10 did not return. The school anticipates a



Teacher Dan Diosa and these students were among the 90 percent of the faculty and 80 percent of the students who returned to Jesuit High in January. Many had spent the first semester at Jesuit schools in Houston and Dallas.

dip in applications of about 10 percent for the next school year, reflecting the metropolitan area's overall population loss (New Orleans proper is expected to rebound to less than 50 percent of its pre-storm population by fall).

Just after the new year, the halls and classrooms were already ringing with the sounds of students. The young men who had been at St. Martin's were back on Jesuit High's campus finishing up the semester and taking exams while their peers who had enrolled elsewhere were already done.

The first floor of the school for the most part now resembles more of a construction site than a disaster zone: walls and floors have been ripped out, ruined furniture carted away. The gym and auditorium have also been gutted. Make-shift plywood walls and plastic sheeting line the corridors, and everywhere "Do Not Enter" is posted or painted. Giambelluca gives a wry look when asked whether his teenage charges would actually attempt to scale the construction walls and explore the bowels of the building, as if to say "How could they not?"

Fr. Tony McGinn, SJ, Jesuit's president, anticipates that all work will be done by mid August, in time for the next school year. They're in the bidding process now, and then, like everyone else along the Gulf Coast, they'll have to deal with FEMA when it comes time for reimbursement.

In the meantime, McGinn's gratitude knows no bounds. He is grateful to fellow Jesuits and colleagues, who opened their high schools up to his students, not only educating them but in many instances also housing, feeding, and even clothing them. Many made financial contributions. The school's alumni have been generous despite the fact that nearly two-thirds of them live in town and were themselves affected by Katrina.

McGinn's message to the students is simple. "What are we
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Celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse cooked up a storm at Jesuit-founded Café Reconcile when it reopened; guests included New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin (right) as well as first responders to the flooding.

IN FLOODING, as in real estate, it's all about location. Café Reconcile, the Jesuit-founded hospitality training center/restaurant in New Orleans, took in a foot or two of water. But it is coming back with a bang. Famed television chef Emeril Lagasse cooked there one night for a full house of first responders, neighbors, and benefactors to celebrate the official reopening. The café added construction training to its list of services, because if there's one thing this city needs right now, it's people who know what they're doing with a hammer and a nail. If you know how to make a roux on top of that, you're worth your weight in gold.

"It's a new set of eyeglasses that you're looking through," says Michael Bourg, New Orleans Province's executive director for development, in talking about the province's many other apostolates, each one in a different state of disrepair after Katrina.

When Loyola University reopened January 9, over 85 percent of the students who had evacuated were back. They'll be catching up their education in two tough semesters: January through April and May through July, but they're facing a big student housing crunch while the university itself is facing massive tuition-revenue shortfalls and recruitment challenges.

The two Boys Hope/Girls Hope homes in the city—for children from troubled families—filled up with water like

Jesuit ministries in New Orleans hit by Katrina are coming back

bathtubs; one has been partially rebuilt, but the other is still filled with mold and ruined furniture. Immaculate Conception Church flooded only in the basement and reopened last month with a wedding. The Harry Tompson Center for the Homeless, named after a famed New Orleans Jesuit, is serving a population of Latino construction workers, and Good Shepherd Nativity School has reopened, but with less than a quarter of its previous 89 students. Most had scattered throughout the region and the country after spending hellish days on rooftops or at the Superdome and Convention Center.

The Jesuits and province office staff will be relocating from temporary quarters in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, probably to New Orleans's Warehouse District in this post-Katrina period. What they have always known is that this is where God was calling them to be; they are in it for the long haul.

"For me, it's been a total reaffirmation," says Bourg, driving through his hometown. He and his Jesuit colleagues will be instruments of resurrection—not just rebuilding—in New Orleans. They are companions on this journey. **C**



The Jesuits' Immaculate Conception Church was spared major damage, but these statues had to be dragged out of the flooded basement.

learning from this? What does this teach us?" he asks them and himself. "The size of this disaster has really called forth in people a change in perspective." He recognizes a world-class, real-world opportunity to teach students that the true values that will help them to succeed are within.

Losses and gains

It has been a difficult time. Some students lost aunts and uncles; Giambelluca's grandmother died in the evacuation. McGinn estimates that a quarter of their current students had five or more feet of water in their homes. But he reminds them, "The material things you need are fewer than you thought." Compassion for others. Optimism. Expressing gratitude. Not falling into self-pity. Five years at Jesuit High compressed into a lesson as fast as a tidal surge, as long as an exodus.

"There is a tremendous amount of cooperation and self-sacrifice that is encouraging and uplifting," McGinn says. Asked if this is the greatest challenge of his fourteen years at Jesuit, he does not hesitate. "This is not a difficult job because of the tremendous support and generosity people have shown."

As the new semester begins, with assembly the first day and a welcome




Pierre DeGruy, Jesuit High's development director, is part of the crew aiming to complete major repairs by mid August, the start of next school year.

week of activities, including one day to wear the uniform of the school students attended during the fall months, life is slowly returning to normal. The cafeteria isn't up and running yet, so lunch is a mishmash of bag lunches, pizza, po' boys, and smoothies, but Mass is still celebrated each morning at 7:15. Service work will still be encouraged, although the emphasis will likely shift from impoverished

regions out of state to damaged areas in town.

"This is our own Appalachia at this point," says Giambelluca, gesturing around, at the street, the city, the region. But not the school. Jesuit High is maintaining. A little smaller, a little dustier, but coming back nonetheless.

"How many students get to be a part of a city reinventing itself?" he asks during a break in the tour. He is still wearing his Jesuit fleece, and it is cool inside the empty, gutted corridors.

"There's no handbook for this," Giambelluca says, although he's working on one now: emergency preparedness in event of potential catastrophe; how to keep your head above water, carry on, and, most important, evacuate when they tell you to. It will all be in there, peppered with gratitude. What's the loss of a gym floor when you still have each other? "We've just been so lucky and blessed to hold all of this together." 



Jesuit High's neighborhood will bear the scars of Katrina for years, but the school is adamant about continuing its educational mission, begun in 1847.

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