Ten years later:
Reminders of Hurricane Katrina and Rita linger in southern Louisiana

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While life has returned to "normal" for most people of the South after the 10 years since Hurricane Katrina, there are still constant reminders everywhere of the destruction and arduous recovery the storm caused 10 years ago this August.

Go to New Orleans now and you are greeted with a pulsing tourism industry, from bright-eyed families socializing in City Park, groups of friends wandering in the French Quarter who clutch onto the necks of their "Hand Grenades," the infamous drink sold on Bourbon Street.

"It's remarkable," said Michael Martin, Ph.D., director of the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. "Ten years later I could spend a week in New Orleans and not even know what happened during Katrina. I bet most tourists don't even see it."

If one were to wander down Tulane Avenue, however, just a short walk from the Quarter, he or she would be greeted with the towering gray abandoned structure that was Charity Hospital. Wander a few blocks from City Park, and you can see a house that hasn't been occupied since Katrina and still bears the iconic spray-painted x-code on the front, the marking system for searching homes and buildings for dead bodies after the storm.

"There were three things that made this thing such a devastating hurricane," Martin said. "Number one, the sheer magnitude of Katrina. Two, there was so much media coverage compared to the storms that occurred in the past 30 to 40 years before. That coverage dramatized it in such a way that others haven't been. Three, it was a major American city that was devastated. The storm surge created havoc and flooding; then there was the failure of man-made canals."

"From government officials to engineers to the public at large, no one expected the storm to be that bad," he continued.

Crystal Morgan, a journalism student at UL Lafayette, lived in New Orleans when the storm rolled in. She evacuated to Baton Rouge with an educational live-in program she was a part of, Boys Hope Girls Hope. She was separated from her mother and sister, who stayed at their home in Gentilly, in northeast New Orleans. She did not receive any news of her family until late September — nearly a month after the storm — and was the last of the students she evacuated with to find her relatives.

"It was really bad," Morgan recalled, her eyes glazing over as she let herself fall back into the past. "It was worse because everyone else had already found their parents, and I was new to the program, so I didn't really know the other girls.

"We kept seeing horrible things on the news, and they kept making us turn the TV off. We were already hearing horror stories of bodies floating down streets..."
in the flood water. I kept thinking that could have been my mom. It was really hard," she continued.

Morgan’s mom and sister wound up staying at their home for the storm. Once water started coming into the house, they joined neighbors, who were fishermen in their boat. The group broke into a nearby church and stayed there until they could be rescued. From there, they were taken to San Antonio.

Though Morgan returned to New Orleans in January 2006 with Boys Hope Girls Hope, her mother was not able to return to Gentilly until 2008.

Katrina, which made landfall on Aug. 29, 2005, officially caused 1,833 deaths. After the levee failure in New Orleans, water flooded 80 percent of the historic city — the coup de grace for the city's buildings that were already struggling to survive against the Category 3 winds.

"Thousands of people were sent with news teams to capture live footage," said Elizabeth Skilton, Ph.D., a history professor at UL Lafayette who specializes in hurricanes. "We saw lots of reports of looting and murders, but the statistics show it was much lower than that."

According to her, Katrina was just part of a larger culture that responds to disasters.

"We’ve tried since the ’50s to be as prepared as possible, so many preempted efforts, but the legislation came after the effect," Skilton said.

Despite several calls to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for a comment, it failed to give a response.

"New Orleans is a kind of special place," Martin said. "People have strong opinions about it; they don’t say it’s an average city — it’s distinctive. It’s amazing; you ended up with people from outside (the city) moving in to try to save it. So many people coming in fundamentally changed the city — it shifted the demography. There are so many new houses (and) new neighborhoods filled with families."

It’s also important to remember while New Orleans was the most publicized victim of the storm, hundreds of cities and towns along the Gulf were also devastated. JoAnne DeRouen, Ph.D., a sociology professor from UL Lafayette, has spent the last eight years studying the recovery efforts of three towns in Southern Louisiana that were impacted by Katrina or Rita, or both.

Buras, located at the very southern tip of East Louisiana in Plaquemines Parish, was in the area where Katrina first made landfall, and the tiny, bucolic town was completely demolished.

Just as the Superdome was an icon for New Orleans during the storm, Buras' water tower, which had been toppled over in the storm, served as a symbol of how badly the storm hit the community.

The community returned despite the decimation and tediously began to rebuild. Some of the residents have opted for what DeRouen called "disposable housing," which is inexpensive housing that is not designed to withstand a hurricane.

"Losing their houses was significant," DeRouen said. "Losing friends in the community hurts more, though. Housing can be replaced — but friends, community, trust in your neighbors, all that stuff can’t be put back."

It took about five years after the storm to rebuild a grocery store and for the rabbits to re-establish their population — rabbit hunting is a favorite pastime among the citizens.

According to Martin, Katrina was just as powerful as Hurricane Rita. But Rita hit places of much lower population and rural areas, while Katrina devastated metropolitan New Orleans.

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Martin said he believed if a Katrina-sized hurricane hit the South today, then the only thing that would be handled differently is the evacuation of the city.

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