



Rising from the Ashes

DEVASTATED BY HURRICANE KATRINA, THE TOWN OF PHOENIX, LOUISIANA IS COMING BACK TO LIFE.

STAN FRIEDMAN

Before Hurricane Katrina, Michael Gromer had never heard of Phoenix, Louisiana, a tiny, historically African American community south of New Orleans, so small that it barely warranted a dot on most maps. Then Hurricane Katrina sent a wave crashing over a nearby Mississippi River levee and quickly destroyed all but fifteen of the community's 180 homes, leaving Phoenix on the long list of communities devastated by the storm. And Gromer, like many Covenanters, was drawn to the Gulf Coast to try and help.

Today, Phoenix has become a home away from home for Gromer, who travels 1,000 miles from Kansas City, Kansas, every other week to oversee the work of a wide variety of groups who want to help the community live out

the words of the prophet Nehemiah: "Let us arise and rebuild."

A custom homebuilder and contractor, Gromer learned of Phoenix in the summer of 2005 while helping his church, Hillcrest Covenant of Prairie Village, Kansas, construct thirty-one houses in Pascagoula, Mississippi, another storm-devastated town. Hillcrest began working there shortly after Katrina struck. They followed in the footsteps of Celebration Covenant Church in Omaha, Nebraska.

Without intending to, Gromer gradually became the Hillcrest project manager. He made more than a dozen trips to Pascagoula, taking hundreds of volunteers from Hillcrest and other congregations. Gromer became involved "in a major way," says Don Steadman, Hillcrest's missions pastor.

"It just seemed to be a good time

for him to be able to go there” Steadman says.

As Hillcrest was wrapping up in Pascagoula, Jim Sundholm, director of Covenant World Relief, told church leaders about conditions in Phoenix, located in Louisiana’s Plaquemines Parish. (Covenant World Relief has supported work in both communities.) A group from Hillcrest traveled with Sundholm to visit Phoenix, and came away believing that God was directing them to commit time, labor, and funds to the town after the Pascagoula project was finished.

Gromer led the church’s first crew in July 2006, which made a big impression on Phoenix residents.

“They had seen many people pass through there that had promised them things and never delivered,” Steadman says. Since then several hundred people from Hillcrest have worked in the community. During the planning process, community and church leaders realized that if the reconstruction was going to be successful, someone would have to coordinate every group that traveled to Phoenix. Gromer fit the bill.

“Michael won the respect and trust of the leaders of the community,” Steadman says. “He’s tremendous not only in construction, but also with people.”

Gromer downplays his part in the project, pointing instead to the host of volunteers and community members involved. Still, it’s clear he plays a key role, even when back home. While at work, he fields constant phone calls from potential volunteers and organizes logistics. Every detail—building materials, work plans, sleeping quarters—must be arranged ahead of time.

Gromer is amazed at the number and variety of people contacting him: church groups from across the U.S. (ranging from Covenanters to Unitarians), non-governmental agencies, and even some biomedical salespeople who concluded their national meeting in New Orleans with a work day in

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Phoenix. During one week in March, seven congregations sent a total of 225 volunteers to the community.

“Word of mouth is starting to spread,” Gromer says. “It seems like we’re getting just the right mix of timing.”

Hillcrest Covenant has committed to Phoenix “because it seems to be where God is leading,” Gromer says. He adds that church members were inspired by a quote from Henry Blackaby’s book, *Experiencing God*: “Just find out what God is doing and adjust your life to get in on it.”

And there’s a lot of work to do in Phoenix. Most of the town’s homes remain in ruins, along with the regional economy. Orange trees dot the landscape around Phoenix, but Katrina wiped out much of the crop. Summers are hot and almost unbearably humid. Sweat and bugs are ever-present.

No one seems to know how many people lived in Phoenix before Katrina—estimates range anywhere from 300 to 600. Roughly 200 have returned, but many are seniors, and the number of children is far fewer than when the storm hit.

Rebuilding efforts have focused on housing, as there were no businesses in Phoenix before Katrina hit. Residents traveled to New Orleans to work and to shop for all their needs. The closest business is a gas station several communities away where the ferry docks. (A ten-minute ferry ride across the Mississippi is part of the forty-minute drive from Phoenix to New Orleans.) The fishing industry that operated farther south of Phoenix also suffered heavy

damage and is only now beginning to recover. Recently, community leaders have developed a business development plan and applied for government funding to help construct new retail businesses.

Resident Patricia “Ann” Thomas bristles when asked why she would return to the area. “There’s the assumption that this isn’t a place worth coming back too,” she says. “Just because living here may seem hard to you, doesn’t mean it is to us.”

Thomas and others are proud of



While recovering from the devastation of the hurricane, residents of Phoenix set up a temporary prayer chapel.

their community’s heritage and believe it has a bright future, if given the opportunity to rebuild.

Phoenix was founded in 1810, settled by former slaves on marshland that other people considered worthless. Their descendants worked hard to hold on to the community. Many of the streets in town are named after families who settled there. Residents say they remain in Phoenix in part to honor the sacrifices that made their community possible.

Dorothy Stone, eighty-two, saw Phoenix nearly destroyed by Hurricanes Flossie in 1956 and Betsy in 1965, only to be reborn after each storm. She began clearing debris from her property

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almost as soon as the waters from Katrina receded. "This is where I've always been," she says. A garden now grows outside her home, which was rebuilt by volunteers.

Ann Thomas was one of the first to return and has been a determined force for rebuilding Phoenix. Since shortly after the storm, she and her husband, Dymond, have lived in a cramped FEMA trailer on the ground where their house once stood.

"It's my home," says Thomas, adding that her sights are set on the future, not the past.

"If we don't show the young people that this place can come back, how will they accept disasters later?" she asks. "What happens here can be a lesson for whatever they face."

In the first months following the disaster, Thomas oversaw a food and clothing distribution center housed in a trailer and run by Zion Traveler's Baptist Church, where she attends. That trailer has now been transformed into an education center with Internet service and space where children can receive tutoring.

The reopening of the town's school last summer brought back some of the town's young families, says Thomas. She believes that more will follow, but admits that some may never return. Students currently meet in portable classrooms.

Thomas says she will always remember the day the trucks carrying the portable units rolled into town. "Oh that was a thrill that morning!" she recalls. "We had the trucks stop so the kids could see."

Tyrone Edwards, pastor of Zion Traveler's Baptist Church, is the town's central spiritual leader. He has made Nehemiah's exhortation to rebuild the town's rallying cry. The words are prominently displayed on a beam stretching across the front of the sanctuary.



Members from Hillcrest Covenant Church and Castle Oaks Covenant Church (Colorado) join residents of Phoenix in rebuilding homes destroyed by Katrina.

The church, once flooded with tons of bayou muck, has been cleaned and totally restored. Edwards was determined that the church would live on, despite losing its building. On New Year's Eve of 2006, the congregation held a worship service on the levee bank where the water first broke through.

"We thanked God for our lives and what he was going to do," recalls Edwards. "We used a volunteer fire department truck generator for lights."

The church hosted meetings between community leaders and leaders from Hillcrest to discuss details for the new homes being built in Phoenix. Residents decided on two floor plans, both roughly 1,000 square feet, with two or three bedrooms. Each also would have a front porch, a community necessity as well as a relief from the heat. Residents pay for the materials with insurance or FEMA money they have received. A two-bedroom house costs roughly \$29,000 to build, while a three-bedroom costs \$39,000, says Edwards.

So far, six homes have been completed, and seven are under construction. Other homes have been repaired or undergone major reconstruction, including new wiring, dry wall, and air conditioning.

Residents contribute labor however they can, "even if it is just sweeping," Gromer says.

Such small acts eventually will lead to bigger gains, Edwards says. "It will take a lot of patience, but we walk by faith and not by sight," he adds, draw-

ing from Hebrews 11:1. "That Scripture has been revealed to the people of this community like never before."

Phoenix is experiencing a long-awaited new day, Edwards says. When Katrina leveled much of the Gulf Coast, it unearthed some of the region's long-ignored legacy of racism. That evil has never been far from Phoenix. Like

many early settlers, Edward's grandfather was beaten on several occasions by whites who wanted to force him from the land.

Louisiana political boss Leander Perez, one of the nation's most adamant segregationists, was born in the parish and ruled almost autonomously for decades while holding various local offices, including prosecuting attorney. He kept out civil rights workers by controlling the ferries, and harassed African American residents when they tried to vote.

Edwards says the work being done now in Phoenix is healing the past. He jokes that Gromer, who is white, might as well build his own house in Phoenix.

"I feel very much a part of the community," says Gromer, now a close friend with Edwards. "They don't care that I'm white anymore than I care that they are black."

Along with his work in Phoenix, Gromer still has a thriving business to run back in Kansas City. That work hasn't suffered too much, he says.

"I have real understanding customers," he says.

Phoenix has become a family project for the Gromers. His wife, Alison, and their four children ages nine through eighteen, all have traveled to Phoenix. He tries to take at least one child on every trip.

Hillcrest plans to stay involved in Phoenix indefinitely.

"That's up to God," Gromer says, before heading back to work. □