

After the storm:

Black small businesses struggle to survive

By **DAMASO REYES**

Special to the AmNews

New Orleans, LA – As efforts are undertaken this week to present Mardi Gras, AmNews correspondent Damaso Reyes visits the devastated 9th Ward.

Every few minutes while driving through the lower 9th ward of New Orleans it becomes increasingly easy to say to oneself, “It can’t possibly get worse than this,” and then heartbreakingly, it does. For block after

block in every direction only ruins remain. Houses which once held families and neighborhoods which once were home to vibrant Black communities have been wiped from the earth. Navigating the debris covered street was Ed Robinson, owner of L&R Security, a local firm that once had more than 200 full-time and 150 part-time employees, but is now struggling to find guards to fulfill its few remaining contracts.

Though he had toured the devastation dozens of times over the past six months he seemed



Black small business owner Ed Robinson inspects the destruction that is still visible in New Orleans' 9th ward six months after Hurricane Katrina struck.
(Damaso Reyes photo)

no less affected than a first time visitor. The physical wasteland that was visible all around seemed like an appropriate

symbol for the less observable ruin in which Black small businesses now find themselves.

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Close Florida boot camps, demand NAACP and pols

By **SAEED SHABAZZ**

Special to the AmNews

The Florida State Black Legislative Caucus and the Florida State office of the NAACP said they would continue meetings with state officials until the entire system of juvenile boot camps are evaluated and then closed.

“There is a serious need for systemic changes, and we won’t stop pressing the state to deal with these issues,” stated Adora Obi Nweze, Florida NAACP state conference chairman. This madness has to stop, stressed Ms. Nweze. “These facilities have taken advantage of our young Black men, using choke holds to make them say ‘yes, sir.’ Our children have no voice,” she insisted.

The call to close the facilities was made after the facts surrounding the death of a 14-year-old boy on January 6 in a Pensacola, Florida hospital were made public. He was incarcerated at the Panama City camp, which is under the Bay County Sheriff’s office.

According to press reports, Martin Lee Anderson died within hours of his arrival at the Panama City camp, which is run for the state by the Bay County Sheriff’s office. The 14-year-old was sent to the camp after an arrest in June for allegedly stealing his grandmother’s jeep and later violating his probation by trespassing at a school, according to officials.

On February 16, the Bay County chief medical examiner ruled that the 14-year-old’s death was because of “natural causes,” according to a story in the Miami Herald. The medical examiner said the young man suffered from a genetic blood disorder caused by a sickle cell trait that caused him to bleed to death; and that his death was not caused by the beating by guards which had been captured on videotape.

The Florida Southern Christian Leadership Conference said they wanted to hear from the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America on the autopsy findings. A family attorney called the medical examiner’s report a “case of home cooking,” giving the sheriff’s office what they wanted, according to the

Miami Herald.

The NAACP in Florida told reporters they are requesting a statewide independent prosecutor, and asking the U.S. Attorney’s Office to probe possible civil rights violations in the Anderson case.

The U. S. Justice Department announced on February 15 that it is investigating possible civil rights violations in the case of Anderson. Activists charge that the teen was the third Black youth to die in a boot camp supervised by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.

Gov. Jeb Bush has been quoted as saying that the federal civil rights investigation was “appropriate.” There is a death and there has been a lot of attention given to it, the governor told reporters. “We look forward to the U.S. Attorney and the federal government investigating this,” Gov. Bush stated.

One Black Florida state legislator has argued that “race is an issue,” according to The Broward Times, a Black newspaper, published in Florida.

De Lacy Davis of the Newark-based Black Cops Against Police Brutality said he agreed with the presumption of the racial factor. “I remember the case of Lionel Tate, who had been sentenced to life in prison at the age of 12 for the accidental death of a six-year-old family friend,” Davis noted.

He and other activists won Tate’s freedom a day before his 17th birthday. “I am talking about a mindset in Florida as it relates to Blacks and the criminal justice system there. Around the time of the Lionel Tate case there were two young white males who beat their father to death with a baseball bat -- and they meant to kill him. They were sentenced to seven years,” the activist noted.

According to Ms. Nweze, the NAACP will be holding a Town Hall meeting in Panama City this weekend around the issue of the boot camps. “We want to find out the feeling of the people on the ground, then we will approach the U.S. Department of Justice on filing a civil rights law suit against the state, if necessary,” she told the AmNews. “There is a real sense of urgency on our part to get to the bottom of this,” she concluded.

Alabama churches burn

By **CYRIL J. BARKER**

Special to Amsterdam News

Memories of the past are sending chills throughout rural Alabama as 10 churches in the state have been set ablaze.

Police are currently trying to get in contact with two white men who authorities say torched nine Baptist churches in Sumter, Greene, Bibb and Pickens counties just south of Birmingham, Ala.

The first arson attack occurred on Feb. 3 with five churches burning in Bibb County and the other four happening a day later in Sumter, Greene and Pickens counties. A 10th church fire in Lamar

County led to the arrest of a mentally disturbed man who was trying to copy the current string of the first nine fires. Authorities say that the fire set to that abandoned church was in no way linked to the first nine.

Police are still questioning the motive for the nine church burnings. The churches had both Black and white congregates, and were all Baptist. Many of the fires were started in the pulpits.

Witnesses reported seeing two white men in a sport utility vehicle near the fires. Authorities have also confirmed that the suspects may have been trapped

in the churches shortly before the buildings were engulfed in flames.

Police in Alabama are asking the public to come forward with any information they may have concerning the church fires. Authorities have received over 400 tips but are primarily concerned about copycats who might attempt to set more churches on fire due to the media’s coverage of the attacks.

In the meantime, leaders and members of the burned churches say they are optimistic that police will catch the perpetrators of the desecration.

Controversial Patriot Act gains extension

By **SAEED SHABAZZ**

Special to the Amsterdam News

The compromise between United States Senate Republican holdouts and the White House over a long-term extension of the USA Patriot Act is an improvement over the original bill, which was signed into law in October 2001, according to some of those who favor the bill. Others charge that the extension fails to make critical changes necessary to safeguard the freedom and privacy of American citizens. Critics from the left and right had been saying the new legislation was a bad deal.

Congress had voted earlier last week to extend the current law until March 10 to allow additional time for deliberation, which would take place when Congress reassembles later this month.

“I expect Congress to understand that we’re still at war, and they got to give us the tools necessary to win this war,” President George W. Bush told a group of federal prosecutors at a White House meeting on January 31.

Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, announced the compromise on February 8 at a news conference in the Capitol. Sen. Specter credited Vice President Dick Cheney with intervening to help bring the House and Senate together.

The measure provides a four-year extension of the government’s ability to conduct roving wiretaps – which may involve multiple phones – and seek access to many personal records covered by the bill. Other important parts of the bill involve the ability of law-enforcement officials to gain access to a wealth of personal data, including library records, as part of investigations into suspected terrorist activity.

Also extended for four years is the power to wiretap “lone wolf” terrorists who may operate on their own, without control from a foreign agent.

“The wailing over privacy rights in libraries reflects a complete misreading of the Patriot Act,” writes former U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese, also a member of the Heritage Foundation (heritage.org). In an Op Ed piece in Sunday’s Daily News Mr. Meese stated that the Patriot Act “doesn’t mention libraries at all. Its mention of books, which has fueled paranoid fantasies among the nation’s librarians, refers to financial records – the kind crooks like to cook.”

Mr. Meese’s comments refer to Section 215, which had made libraries subject to FBI subpoenas. Investigators could still seek information about suspects who use libraries to access the

Internet, but the information would have to be obtained from Internet service providers and not from the libraries.

Under the compromise, subpoena recipients would have the right to challenge the gag orders that are attached to such subpoenas, although they would still have to comply with the request and wait a full year before appealing the order. Gag order recipients also would no longer have to provide the FBI with names of attorneys they consult about the subpoenas.

Other changes to the Patriot Act: destroy information inadvertently obtained on innocent Americans; establish a clear process for judicial review of Section 215 and national security letter orders; provide explicit judicial review of a national security letter gag order; sunset Section 215 and roving wiretap authority in four years; limit “sneak and peek” search warrants to 30 days; require greater clarity for roving wiretap standards; mandate detailed reporting on the use of these powerful law enforcement tools.

“The light cosmetic changes in this deal are a slap in the face to people of this country who have worked hard to protect our quickly eroding liberties,” said Nancy Talanian, a Massachusetts member of the Bill of (Continued on Page 6)



(Damaso Reyes photo)

Business

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"It seems like no one cares about Black small businesses," Robinson said, his gentle voice absent of any hint of resentment. "They say they do, but they really don't," he added while swerving to avoid part of a house which had collapsed into the street.

In the half year since Hurricane Katrina came ashore and wreaked havoc with the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of the city's residents, the 9th ward isn't the only thing that hasn't recovered; thousands of Black small businesses are still reeling from the storm, and the help which was so eagerly promised by government officials hoping to insulate themselves from blame for a late and lackluster

response has yet to arrive, leaving men and women who were once the core of the community to largely fend for themselves.

LOANS ON TOP OF LOANS

Twenty-seven years ago Robinson started his security business while working as a guard at the Superdome, and eventually grew it into a four million dollar a year company which provided security for events like the Superbowl and the PGA Open. When the storm hit, the New Orleans native left town, something he hadn't done in many years. While in Houston with his family he saw the damage on television and felt helpless. During the three weeks he spent there before he was able to return, the anxiety only increased. "Not knowing if we had a home or even had a business was the worst thing in my life," he said.

When he returned, most of his employees had evacuated like he did, but had not been able to return. Even if they had wanted to, most of their houses had been totally destroyed in the flooding. Robinson's first home, in which his daughter, who got married a week before the storm hit, resided, now was ruined, along with all her wedding presents.

For the next two months neither he nor his partner took a salary as they struggled to stay afloat. Their offices had survived the storm, but not the subsequent looting which claimed their vehicles, firearms and other equipment. Without electricity or phone service they were forced to rent another office at additional cost they could not afford to incur. Forced to use his savings to meet payroll, Robinson could have used the government assistance which was promised in the weeks after the storm, but none could be found.

"They say all this money is coming but how do we access it?" he asked. Most of the assistance that is accessible has come in the form of loans, but for businesses already saddled with debt this is not an attractive option. "Everyone wants to offer us loans, but we're all loaned out. We've got loans on top of loans," he added.

TRYING TO RUN A BUSINESS OUT OF A TRUCK ON A CELL PHONE

Before Katrina hit, Arnold Baker was the perfect example of a successful Black small business owner in New Orleans. A self-described military brat, he fell in love with the city when he visited in college for a football game. When an injury left him unable to continue playing, he became interested in business, eventually working his way up the ladder of one of the nation's

largest mall development companies. When he got involved with redeveloping one of the nation's toughest malls, he caught the attention of the city government and became an assistant to the mayor for policy, planning and development, helping to oversee public/private development deals. While in city government he led a trade mission to South Africa where that country was building concrete factories with foreign investment to help facilitate the rebuilding of the nation. With high barriers to entry, the concrete industry is nearly all white-owned, but in 2003 Baker took a chance and started Baker Ready Mix Concrete, buying cheap land and securing private investment.

By the time the hurricane hit, the company was on track to have a record year, and he was planning on building another three factories. But his plant, which was one of the closest to the water, was hard hit by the wind and flood waters. Convinced to leave town by his wife, Baker could not believe what he saw when he returned to New Orleans several days later.

"Having worked for the city in an executive capacity, implementing hurricane programs, I could not grasp the results of our federal, state and city decision makers," he said, though he noted he did not have access to the information on which they based their choices. While he was able to find a way back into the city, the eight-foot flood waters prevented him not only from reaching his plant, but even his own house for nearly two weeks. When he did reach his factory he found it a complete mess. His concrete trucks were totaled, his facilities were in no shape to produce anything. His employees were not even in town yet; some were so traumatized they would never return.

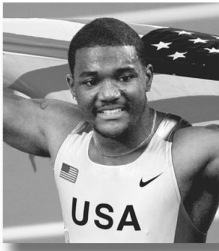
"Where do you start?" he asked himself in the weeks that followed. "Where do you begin? My business is in a total shambles, my house is in total shambles, this is everything I've invested my life into." Like so many other New Orleanians he decided to rebuild. Fortunately he had the resources to be able to. The money he had planned to use for expansion was now diverted to keep his employees on payroll, rebuild his factory and buy new trucks, leaving him several years behind where he would like to be, but still in business.

As he discussed his struggles, fellow small business owner Robert Packnett, who owns a landscaping business, walked into his office.

"Nothing," he replied when asked what help he had received from the government in rebuilding his business since the hurricane. "I just think no one cares about Black businesses...Today I'm still staying in somebody's house, trying to run a business out of a truck on a cell phone."

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