

By AMBER ROESSNER
Barrow County News

“New Orleans is back,” a beignet-nibbling tourist said, gazing at the historic French Quarter from a slow-moving streetcar. I cringed, having only a day before seen the utter ruin blocks away.

Before traveling to New Orleans to cover the American Academy of Ophthalmology annual meeting last week, I, like many Americans, had Katrina-fatigue. Although I had been glued to my television in late 2005, what had happened in New Orleans since then had slipped off my radar.

Had I not detoured more than two miles away to the Lower Ninth ward, I could have left believing that New Orleans was back to normal more than two years after the havoc of Hurricane Katrina.

My eyes were opened by an eight-hour van ride with two volunteer guides from Women of the Storm, an organization formed to keep elected officials and journalists abreast of the city’s painfully slow recovery. The fact is that large parts of the city look like a third-world country. Amidst piles of rubble, thousands of individuals struggle daily to rebuild their storm-ravaged lives.

Tears streamed down my cheeks when I faced a vacant lot where a crumbling porch foundation and a twisted section of chain-link fence bore witness to happier days.

My heart broke as lifelong New Orleans’ resident Calvin Bernard, who lost his wife to the storm, told me how lost he would be without the Common Ground Collective, a community-initiated volunteer organization dedicated to the rebuilding effort. Bernard manages a center that distributes donated clothing, household good and other essentials. “It’s been a living hell,” he said. “The government has truly forgotten about us. I lost everything here; if I didn’t have Common Ground, I would be in an insane asylum.”

After only a few hours in damaged neighborhoods, an unshakable sense of depression settled over me. Imagine how residents of the Ninth Ward must feel each day.

In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, CDC Director Julie Gerberding said that the greatest storm-related health challenge would be dealing with mental health problems that were sure to result. Her words still ring true today.

In the first four months after the storm, suicide rates increased by more than 300 percent above pre-Katrina levels, according to coroner’s office statistics.

Social worker Cecile Tebo, who heads the New Orleans Police Department’s crisis unit, says this is still happening. In the last two years, approximately 80 percent of the

NOPD's mental health crisis calls have involved suicidal adults, many of whom had no history of mental illness before the storm.

More recently, Tebo has witnessed a surge in severely depressed adolescents who snap and threaten their own life or the lives of others. One burned down his family's house not long ago. According to the New Orleans School System, 45 percent of students were in obvious need of mental health care during the 2006-07 school year.

Despite the obvious need for psychiatric help, Tebo says there is a horrifying dearth of resources. "The healthcare system for people with mental illness has reverted back to the dark ages here," she said. Currently, less than half of the approximately 350 pre-Katrina public and private psychiatric beds in New Orleans are back in service, according to Kevin Stephens, the director of the New Orleans Health Department. And many of these are inaccessible to poor people without insurance.

Fortunately, some rays of sunlight are beginning to penetrate this gloomy mental health picture. Last week, a global list of donors awarded \$523,000 in new funding to six local organizations that help children with mental health problems, and the state launched a workforce initiative aimed at recruiting medical professionals to the area next summer. These are steps in the right direction, but much more is needed to help children and adults tormented by depression and anxiety.

Since returning home, I have struggled to find words for the images that haunt my thoughts. I don't know how to adequately describe the sorrows – and the valor – of survivors who refuse to give up on their hometown. I am grateful for everything that I have long taken for granted, and I want to help the people I met last week.

As you gather around the table this Thanksgiving, I encourage you to count your blessings and consider lending a helping hand in the renewal of New Orleans.