



# St. Bernard-Baton Rouge Connection



## From the Director

Seasons Greetings from the LSU post-Katrina Recovery and Resilience research team!

The purpose of this newsletter is to provide you with an update on our progress with the study. At this time, we are nearing completion of the first phase of the study and are beginning to compile the initial results. Our goal with this newsletter is to provide an insider's glimpse into the nature and purpose of the study, what our initial results suggest, and where we are heading with the study as we move into a new calendar year.

## About the Study

Most people who live in South Louisiana have experienced severe weather, including floods, tornados and hurricanes. The hurricane season of 2005 brought Hurricanes Katrina and Rita slamming into the Gulf Coast region, as far east as Alabama and as far west as portions of southeast Texas. At first, Katrina dominated the news, media, and popular press. In recent years, there have been many articles and books written about the Katrina experience, which may prompt some of you to wonder what is the point of our study and why are we conducting this research five years later? The answer is simple. There are many good scientific and personal reasons for doing a study like this one at this time. Let's take a closer look at both the science and the heart of the study.

From a scientific point of view, the research literature is rich with information on the technological and economic impacts of disaster. Less is known about the social impacts of disaster, including hurricane-related effects on individuals and families.

Many studies have examined the immediate impact of natural disasters, documenting threats to health and well-being shortly after an event such as a hurricane, flood, or fire.

Less is known about long-term effects of a natural or technological disaster five or more years after the event. The purpose of this study is to examine long-term recovery and resilience in directly affected individuals. By resilience, we are referring to one's ability to "bounce back" or respond positively to adversity. This study is designed to provide new and informative scientific evidence concerning the variables or factors that may help individuals find their way back to "normal living" in whatever form it may take after a disaster such as Katrina. Having objective scientific knowledge is important as such knowledge provides a solid foundation for interventions to help those affected by disaster as well as shaping policy and disaster management efforts in the future.

From a personal point of view, we believe that certain factors are critical for successful recovery, resilience, and long-term well-being. The scientific literature already tells us about the importance of social support in fostering recovery after a disaster. The scientific literature does not yet tell us about the role of certain psychological factors, such as:

- disposition (*do we look at a glass as half full or as half empty?*);
- spirituality (*do we rely on religious beliefs and practices in our daily lives?*); and
- humor (*does laughter lighten our burdens?*).

In the post-Katrina Recovery and Resilience study, we directly address these factors. Those of you who have already participated in the study know there are a lot of paper and pencil measures to complete. Why so many forms? The reason why is so that we can fully capture the factors we think are important to shaping long-term recovery. A pattern emerges after many people have completed the survey forms in the study. The pattern we expect to see based on theory and personal conviction is that sacred (religious) and secular (humor) forms of coping will be helpful in promoting resilience, health, and long-term recovery in persons who have been directly affected by the storms of 2005.

## First Findings

Thus far, we have interviewed 114 individuals who represent three different groups, as follows:

- Residents of the greater Baton Rouge metropolitan area who were not directly affected by the storm (group 1; 11 persons interviewed to date);
- Residents of St. Bernard and Orleans parishes who were directly affected by the storm and relocated to new homes in non-coastal communities after the storm (group 2; 42 persons interviewed to date), and
- Residents of St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes who were directly affected by the storm and returned to rebuild their homes (group 3; 52 persons interviewed to date).

All group 2 and 3 participants were directly affected with property damage due to wind and water. To date, we have completed scoring for most, but not all of the data collected so far. So, we still have some work to do. That said, we have conducted initial analyses based on 68 completed protocols (groups 2 and 3 only). What we found shows an interesting picture that is mostly what we had expected to see based on theory and prior literature, although there are some surprises. Here is what these data show:

**Age.** One's age in years does not seem to be as important as we had thought it would be. That is, younger and older research participants show far more similarities than differences;

**Gender.** Women appear to have more extensive support systems than do men, although men and women do not differ on our measure of resilience;

**Disposition.** Greater optimism appears to be associated with stronger resilience, confirming our hypothesis;

**Humor.** Use of humor as a coping strategy appears to be associated with resilience, confirming our hypothesis; and

**Spirituality.** Religious beliefs and practices appear to be associated with resilience, confirming our hypothesis.

One of the more interesting trends so far concerns the association between use of humor and spirituality as two different methods of coping with storm-related stresses. Our initial findings suggest that people who are more likely to use humor as a coping strategy may be less inclined to rely on religious beliefs and practices. Similarly, those who are more likely to rely on religious beliefs and practices may be less inclined to use humor as a coping strategy. In short, both secular (humor) and sacred (religious) coping strategies appear to be helpful, but which one is more effective will depend on the individual.



*Katie Cherry (l) and Arnell Curtis (r) at the St. Bernard Council on Aging*



## Future Directions

We are extending our current study to include those directly affected by the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. In this study, we have been and will be interviewing commercial fishers and those employed by the oil industry.

Our objectives are to:

1. To assess threats to psychological well-being and health-related quality of life.
2. To provide new evidence on human adaptive capacities by identifying factors associated with psychological well-being and health.
3. To examine the influence of cultural and governmental entities (e.g., volunteer groups, professionals from outside of the community) on well-being and health.

Please feel free to contact us if you know of someone in the commercial fishing industry or oil industry who might be interested in being interviewed in the study. Dr. Katie Cherry, telephone: 225-578-4099, email: [pskatie@lsu.edu](mailto:pskatie@lsu.edu)

## Around St. Bernard

On July 16, 2010, a ground-breaking ceremony was held for the St. Bernard Parish Hospital that will be built on land donated by the Meraux Foundation. The location is on West Judge Perez, across the street from the new Walmart.

The local chapter of the AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) invited Katie Cherry to give a presentation on her work at the St. Bernard Council on Aging on September 25, 2010. She spoke on successful aging and resilience.



On October 15-17, 2010, Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church hosted the Violet Oyster Festival which was the first time the festival was held since Katrina in 2005. It was a spectacular event with music, carnival rides, plenty of delicious food and a truly memorable t-shirt design by Mary Ann Bazile (as shown above). Members of the research team, including faculty and students, came down for the day and thoroughly enjoyed a fun filled day in St. Bernard parish!



*Floyd Saucier (l), Pamela Forest, and Florence Welborn (r) at the St. Bernard Council on Aging*

## Meet the Research Team

**Katie E. Cherry, PhD**, is a professor in the Psychology Department at LSU and Executive Director of the LSU Life Course and Aging Center (LCAC), an interdisciplinary research center that reports to the LSU Office of Research and Economic Development. She is a developmental psychologist with research expertise in the area of adult cognition and healthy aging. **M.E. Betsy Garrison, PhD**, is a professor in the School of Human Ecology and is also the Associate Dean of the College of Agriculture at LSU. She is a family stress scholar, with expertise in families and disasters. She is an LCAC member and is also affiliated with the Disaster Science and Management (DSM) program at LSU. **Loren D. Marks, PhD**, is an associate professor in the Division of Family, Child, and Consumer Science in the School of Human Ecology at LSU and member of the LCAC. He is a scholar in the area of faith and families. He also has expertise in qualitative methods which are used to identify themes in people's answers to open-ended questions.

In addition to the LSU faculty investigators affiliated with the post-Katrina Recovery and Resilience study, we have a number of research assistants whose are an integral part of our success. **Susan Brigman, PhD**, is a research associate who is living in New Orleans and assisting with interviews conducted at the St. Bernard Council on Aging. **Erin Jackson, MS**, has prepared our survey measures and assisted with data summary. **Jon Tall, MA**, has provided assistance in data management and storage of electronic digital voice recordings. **Pamela Forest** has been working in the field since last April conducting interviews in Baton Rouge, Slidell, and Chalmette. **Kayla Holland** has been instrumental in quantitative data scoring and entry from June to present. Ten other LSU undergraduate students have been busily transcribing the digital voice recordings. Our student transcribers who began in the summer include **Robert Presley, Penni Fontenot, Kelli Broome, and Amanda Chester**. Other student transcribers who joined the research team in the fall include **Sarah Finney, Trevor Johnson, Sam Snoots, Alyson Kennedy, Kaci Yoder, and Ashley Cacamo**.

## A Note of Thanks

In closing, we are deeply grateful to each and every one of you for your time and effort in making the post-Katrina Recovery and Resilience study so successful. Many people have helped us in different ways and we send a heartfelt thanks to each and every one. We are grateful to each one of our research volunteers for their time and generosity in sharing their Katrina experiences. Others have helped us with the many logistics associated with conducting a study of this magnitude, including **Dr. Graham McDougall** (University of Texas at Austin) who has provided accommodations for overnight stays in Metairie; **Gayle Buckley** for teaching us about the historic and rich culture of the area, how to get around, and facilitating access to local resources including the St. Bernard Council on Aging and the Kiwanis Club. We are also grateful to **Fr John Arnone** and **Sr Mary Keefe**, along with many other parishioners from Our Lady of Lourdes Church and St. Bernard Church who have helped with the study. We thank **Susan McNeil** and **Janet Hood** from the St. Bernard Council on Aging and **Sean Warner** of Gulf Coast Trust Bank, both of whom have assisted with recruitment and provided space for interviewing. Lastly, we thank **Buddy Doize** and the St. Bernard Rotary club for their interest in the project and research participation.

To everyone who has contributed to the research project in some way, we send a heartfelt note of thanks. Best wishes for a joyous holiday season and Happy New Year!

