

# SIGNS OF LIFE

## *Surviving Katrina*



Foreword by Josh Neufeld

Essay by Jimmy Chen

Compiled and Edited

by Eric Harvey Brown and Lori Baker

# Foreword

Like most people outside of the path of Hurricane Katrina, my understanding of the storm's destruction was through images. Those images—of people trapped on New Orleans rooftops and abandoned outside the Superdome, of downed trees and boats chugging past flooded homes—motivated me to sign up with my local Red Cross chapter, and eventually to be deployed as a volunteer to Biloxi, Mississippi.

The coast road on Route 90 appeared to have been bombed flat: buildings, trees, everything washed away. Just six weeks after the hurricane, most of the area—with its collapsed buildings, gray trees, and brown grass baking in the sun—had the feel of ancient history, as if the disaster had happened long ago. The water had receded and the skies were clear, and I had trouble envisioning the immensity of the storm: the way the rain kept pouring down, the wind never stopped, and the water just kept rising.

I spent three-weeks on an Emergency Response Vehicle, bringing hot meals to residents. Traveling around what was left of Biloxi, I began to notice the hand-made signs, painted on wood or cardboard, posted at intersections, on rusted-out cars, and on the sides of abandoned buildings. Or the occasional chalked sign on a flight of steps leading up to a concrete slab, giving the address and occupants of a house that no longer existed. These messages—this new kind of graffiti—were a constant reminder of the scope of the disaster. In many ways they were the reverse of the missing posters I remember

so well after 9/11; except they were records of survival, and not of the dead.

Driving through the area where the 30-foot storm surge swept through, or the ghost towns of New Orleans' Sixth & Ninth Wards, the signs bore witness to the storm, speaking of the chaos and destruction, and carrying on a conversation until the residents returned. Long after I came home to my Brooklyn apartment, I remembered those signs, and through them the profound impact the hurricane had on so many lives.

*Signs of Life* is a remarkable collection of the most striking Gulf Coast signs that appeared following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Taken by over forty photographers—local residents, relief volunteers, and those passing through—the messages in *Signs of Life* are sacred and profane, defiant and defeated, heartbreaking and humorous, frightening and encouraging. They remind us that everyone has a story to tell.

The declarative signs strike me first. Like this reassurance, painted on a brick wall: “Mom is okay.” And “Katrina was here,” on the side of a New Orleans building. The signs are sardonic—“Our house,” on the side of a mini trailer; they are defeated—“U win. We are leaving,” on a garage door. Sometimes they are simply a cry into the void, like the wooden sign tacked onto a tangled pile of knocked-down trees: “ALIVE.”

The signs are often angry—at FEMA, insurance companies, our government, and of course, at the hurricane. They are defiant, as in the Biloxi storefront boasting, “I’m still here. We will rebuild Gulf Coast.” The most heartbreaking are the pleas for assistance, like the New Orleans sign begging: “Drop food. 20 of us.”

Animals made up many victims of the storm, and signs speak of the pets left behind. They range from the chilling “Dead dog inside” to a rundown of the domestic menagerie: dogs, cats, snakes fish, birds, and chickens. One garage door, in faded, crossed-out words, tells the heartbreaking story of a collection of pets still inside. As time passes, fewer animals survive.

In my time down South, I was struck how, despite losing everything, survivors often were able to make light of their misfortune. That resiliency—and sense of humor—is evidenced in such signs as this one on a wrecked New Orleans home: “For sale—needs ‘some’ work. Slight water damage.” And don’t forget the NOLA rug store with this warning to would-be trespassers: “I am sleeping inside with a big dog, an ugly woman, two shotguns, and a claw hammer,” reminding us that we are more than the sum of our possessions, and that part of what makes us human is our stubborn refusal to give up.

*Signs of Life* is not an art book. Yes, many of the images are poignant, even beautiful. But these are documentary photos,

a recording of history, giving voice to those who left, those who stayed, and those who were left behind.

As many of the more recent photos in this book show, the residents of the Gulf Coast are still digging their way out of the mess left behind by the storms. New “signs of life” are still appearing. As we enter a new hurricane season, therefore, it’s comforting to know that all profits from the sales of *Signs of Life* will be donated to two organizations providing ongoing and active volunteer work in the Gulf Coast: Common Ground Collective and Hands On Gulf Coast.

Please spread the word about the book—and keep your eyes peeled for *Signs of Life*.

Josh Neufeld  
*August 2006*

*Josh Neufeld is a cartoonist and illustrator from Brooklyn, New York. His autobiographical stories of international travel were published in the graphic novel, A Few Perfect Hours (and Other Stories from Southeast Asia & Central Europe). He documents his experiences as a Red Cross volunteer following Hurricane Katrina in the self-published blog book, Katrina Came Calling.*

[www.JoshComix.com](http://www.JoshComix.com)



Biloxi, MS • September 2005

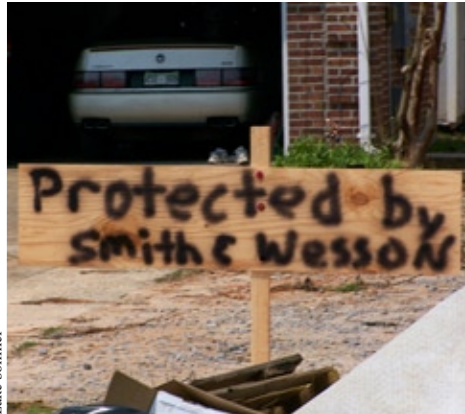


Bart Everson

New Orleans, LA • September 2005



Anthony Posey



Luke Sommer



Anthony Posey



Anthony Posey



Roy J. Skaggs



Joshua E. Miller

Clockwise from top left: *New Orleans, LA • January 2006* | *Long Beach, MS • September 2005* | *New Orleans, LA • November 2005* | *Biloxi, MS • October 2005* | *New Orleans, LA • July 2006* | *New Orleans, LA • October 2005*



St. Bernard Parish, LA • December 2005



*New Orleans, LA • April 2006*



*New Orleans, LA • November 2005*



David Neubert



Lisa Benham

New Orleans, LA • May 2006 | Pearlington, MS • February 2006