Rice Voelker Fund For Recovery

January 4, 2010

At the conclusion of the American Revolution, future U.S. President James Madison feared that the nascent republic had "entered a wilderness without a single footprint to guide us." Known widely as the Father of the Constitution, Jefferson's Secretary of State was also influential in the negotiation of the Louisiana Purchase. Were he transported forward in time, he might have used the same phrase in describing Post-Katrina New Orleans.

While our politicians may have failed to leave footprints, they at least left enough fingerprints to enable our equal-opportunity U.S. Attorney to round up these loathsome creatures that have wallowed in a trough of corruption. Republican/Democrat, White/Black, North Shore/South Shore matter not to this prosecutor's office and for that we are grateful.

For too long the municipal canvas here has been a triptych of waste, fraud, and abuse. But since Katrina, there has been a measureable change in elected officialdom from public ciphers to public servants. Though several of the former linger, most notably in the mayor's office, momentum is on the side of reform.

No better example exists than the establishment of an inspector general's office for the City of New Orleans. The recent appointee to that office is a close, lifelong friend possessed of unimpeachable integrity and highest ability. He sent me an essay by Loyola University Professor Michael Cowan that eloquently summarizes the problems and developing solutions present in our community. Entitled "Elbows Together, Hearts Apart," the essay's title is sourced from a poignant quote of Martin Luther King:

"We do not have to look very far to see the pernicious effects of a desegregated society that is not integrated. It gives us a society where elbows are together and hearts are apart. It gives us spatial togetherness and spiritual apartness."

The developing reform in our political and educational institutions is moving the proximity of our hearts closer to that of our elbows.

Hunger and homelessness persist as the principal social challenges in New Orleans. The fund has supported ($2000) a program of Second Harvest Food Bank to send malnourished children in our public schools home with weekend food packs. The fund continues its support of All Saints Ministries ($3000) in its provision of a food bank and free medical services. A $1000 gift to Southeastern Louisiana Boys and Girls Club was part of a successful $50,000 emergency fund drive for that organization.

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We have written before about the impressive work done by Unity of Greater New Orleans in rescue and rehabilitation of those lost in roofless lives on the streets. A recent rescue by Unity of eleven individuals under a downtown overpass revealed myriad and serious illnesses both mental and physical. Most shocking was that several still wore wristbands from local medical facilities. The dumping of indigent patients is an unacceptable and sadly not uncommon practice here.

In spite of all the desperately ill people she treated during her long life, Mother Teresa maintained that being unwanted "is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience." The fund supplemented its earlier $5000 gift with an additional $2000 to help with the most recent effort by Unity.

Additional fund support for distribution of food during the Christmas season was given to the Covington Rotary foundation ($1000), I Care ($1000), Upward Community Services ($1000), and Folsom Toy Drive ($1000).

Jan Caraway is a working, recently divorced mother whose home was foreclosed on. A family acquaintance purchased the home and has allowed Jan and her four school age children to live in a garage apartment there. A $1000 gift from the fund will help the Caraways get their finances current.

Juliana Barousse is a disabled teenager whose life was dramatically improved with a successful fund drive by her friends to buy her a custom made tandem bike. The fund was a partner in that effort.

When it comes to the New Orleans Saints, the elbows and hearts have always been together. What the “Who Dat” refrain lacks in syntax, it has more than made up for in solidarity.

No greater symbol of apartheid existed in South Africa than its all-white Rugby team, the Springboks. After assuming office, Nelson Mandela decided to give the team his government’s full support in the 1995 Rugby World Cup. He said that sports are "more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barrier. Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, the power to unite people that little else has."

It would be fanciful to suggest that the Saints can solve the divisions in our community. But the oneness of Saints loyalty here at least gives us a template for the possible. The rest is up to us. As the Bruce Springsteen lyric says we are "Workin' On A Dream."

Wherever we are between start and finish of this long endured convalescence, your well placed generosity has moved us closer to our goal and will never be forgotten.

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The ability of the fund to continue its guarantee that 100% of contributed funds are directed in full to qualified charities and individuals is dependent on the generosity of four volunteers: Rachel Lambert, our caseworker; Hubert Daigle, our bookkeeper; Steve Bellaire, our certified public accountant; Pete Burkhalter, our lawyer.

A recent Wall Street Journal article cited a “happiness survey” that ranked Louisiana #1 among the 50 states in its satisfaction with life poll. Given the woeful level of so many conventional quality of life statistics here, the result seems at the least, puzzling. But the hope gene present in those that choose to live here may make us one.

For the calendar year 2009, the fund received $36,250 in gifts from friends outside of the firm and $26,500 from two firm partners. Fund disbursements totaled $52,000. Since inception, fund contributions now total $928,075.00 and our bank balance is $76,069.51.

With every good wish for the New Year,

Tim Rice