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John Deveney reports on New Orleans 7 weeks after Katrina

Deveney Communication, based in New Orleans, was one of the businesses transformed by Hurricane Katrina. The staff scattered to nearby states as the brunt of the storm hit, but they were one of the first to come back and help get the city back up and running. Here's John Deveney's report, seven weeks after the hurricane struck.

It has been seven weeks today since Katrina struck and just over a month since Lindsay, Kara, Chris and I returned to New Orleans.

And it's been that long since I've sent out a generic email to friends that have been supportive in their messages and patient in understanding that the situation has kept me from responding properly. Thank you for both the support and the patience.

It is springtime in New Orleans. Every day new signs of life and renewal appear.

Residents have begun to return, which brings back the character to our area. And those characters are demanding a march toward normalcy pushing the curfew back from midnight to 2 a.m. in most of the city. (When we first landed it was a strictly enforced 6 p.m. though we were the odd civilians in the desolate city.)

Most of the city has electricity and the water is safe again. We still do not have gas, but taking cold showers is a leap forward from bathing with baby wipes and hand sanitizer (yet another skill I've gained from the experience!).

Officially, New Orleans opens for leisure travelers January 1, but visitors are riding buggies, enjoying local cuisine and exploring the city already. The volume of media, relief workers, insurance adjusters and residents made homeless by the tragedy constricts hotel availability. Hotels as well as restaurants, bars and music clubs battle to meet the growing demand without the necessary number of service industry employees. (Lindsay set up a *USA Today* piece on this topic today.)

Anyone need a job?

We may see growth and opportunity concentrated in a single geography unmatched since the gold rush developed California.

Sadly, there has been tremendous destruction. An estimated 60,000 homes are gone. Many business of every size, type and industry will likely not recover. But the rebuilding, rebirth and redevelopment should bring tremendous opportunity and growth.

New Orleans will be the first city in the 21st century to be reborn and redesigned. Plans call for combining our rich cultural heritage with modern ideas to rebuild a great American city.

It's exciting to be part of this effort. Our team has contributed greatly in our own way. We opened the first media center at ground zero to respond to the onslaught from an estimated 2,000 journalists looking for their next big story on the situation. For the past month we've worked (12+ hour days without a day off) with some 300 media outlets and some 1,000 journalists in the media center and via e-mail or phone.

We were a welcomed oasis for the media, providing wireless Internet connectivity, laptops, accurate information, fact checking, and connection to sources, interview subjects, story ideas, resources and Southern hospitality. (The air-conditioning, cold drinks, snacks and hand sanitizer we provided were big

hits too.)

I cannot express how proud I am of our team.

This has been an incredibly difficult time, and they put their personal needs (health, safety) and lives aside to tackle the huge challenges in dire circumstances. And the results have been incredible. They have worked with the elite of the press corps nationally and internationally, and wowed them.

The benefit of their work is impossible to truly measure. Certainly the accurate messages that have been broadcasted and printed across the globe have a great value. As does the counsel provided to our clients and the media, as well as to the general public, the nonprofit community and the small business and residents trying to find their way in the aftermath. The most significant contribution may be in correcting the incorrect stories that could have been incredibly damaging. Clearly there are war stories deserving to be shared over cocktails. I look forward to that.

Conditions when we arrived were rough. The water was not safe to bathe in, in fact scrubbing with bleach was recommended following contact with skin. Receded floodwaters and no electricity or garbage collection for the first month combined to produce a toxic stink beyond description and unfortunately impossible to forget.

The first several weeks we kept the media center open were like boot camp: 12 hrs/day 7 days/week 'soldiering it out' in the rough conditions to do what needed to be done.

Industry leaders recognized the effort and so did the media. We built relationships with media, had some 'regulars' who used the center every day, even when the slow process of the French Quarter returning to life forced us to move around like nomads to available facilities. (Though what other nomads enjoyed locales like the Desire Oyster Bar, The Rib Room or Dickie Brennan's Bourbon House?)

Before we got our first box of MREs (military rations impressive for their self heating and variety), food was a challenge without grocery stores or restaurants. Also, running the media center beyond the curfew left no time to forage. Chris fed us the first night using the small hotel room coffee maker to cook canned soup we brought with us.

When electricity was restored to the French Quarter we moved from the hotel in the Central Business District into Camp Kortman, the home of the lovely and hospitable Kara. All this time we were together 'round the clock and never once got on each other's nerves. We remained committed to each other as a team and to our mission of helping rebuild our beloved city.

Given all this and the good company we were in, you'll not be surprised that we had some good times as well. Following a trip to Baton Rouge (and a grocery store!) we had a wine tasting of Australian Shiraz one night after curfew, and my surprise birthday party progressed (or regressed) into us becoming an outrageously costumed krewé of revelers that officially brought New-Orleans-style mirth back to the French Quarter. (If you have High Definition Television, look for us on a documentary called "Bourbon Street: Alive and Kickin'". Kara will likely be used as the teaser promo).

And, our team that remained in satellite locations did a great job as well. Jeff, Kimberlee and Meghan worked from other points of the country before returning to New Orleans this past week.

This experience has allowed us to grow in more than just the metaphysical sense as well. We have added new clients in South Florida, Texas and Louisiana. And, Kimberlee Lauer joined our team at the beginning of the month. We have known and respected her for several years while she was the senior PR person at a large New Orleans ad agency. We are thrilled to have Kimberlee on our team.

Clearly I should not have let a month go by or done this at the end of a long day. Please forgive the flaws in this update.

Thank you again for all the support and patience. It has kept us going.

We are well and doing well. And there will be an even greater place for you to visit ... a place that will be a source of pride for everyone who restored it by helping, supporting and caring.

New Orleans is not the city that care forgot. It is the city by care reborn.

Thank you for all the love, support, concern and compassion you have given.

My best,

John

John Deveney, ABC, APR
Deveney Communication
Top 5 Boutique PR Firm in the U.S. -- PRWeek, 2004

504.949.3999
fax 504.949.3974
jdeveney@deveney.com

Homepage headline on www.deveney.com: "We're still using satellite offices as well as managing media command centers for an estimated 1,500 embedded journalists in Louisiana. How can you help? Bring your next meeting here. Bring your family. Louisiana is ready to greet you, and New Orleans can't wait to welcome you as soon as she is ready."

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