

NOLA Blogging

Editor's Note: What follows are excerpts from former Richmond resident and OITM contributor Walter Zeichner's blog. He has been volunteering as a mental health counselor at a clinic in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans 6 weeks after Hurricane Katrina.

» Monday 3 October 2005, 8:19 PM

I'm at the Common Ground Clinic in Algiers. I flew in with a friend this afternoon, was met at the airport with more friends in their veggie oil bus.

I've been met with such enthusiasm. There is a lot of gladness to have mental health people show up.

I am just arriving, but from what I see so far, the folks at the clinic are working their asses off. Some folks have been here for weeks, others for days. The immediate sense is one of overwhelm.

It looks like I'll be helping to set up a Recovery Center in the lower 9 district, and then training local community folks in leading effective peer support groups, and helping a 12-step group to form.

Today I received inoculations for Hep A and Tetanus.

P.S. It's just past midnight, I just witnessed the arrest of a young African American man on a bicycle outside the clinic by at least 6 white police officers, most not wearing badges but shirts identifying them as NY State Police. There was no violence. The police were questioning the young man with no attorney present. No weapons were drawn.

» Wednesday 5 October 2005, 3:33 AM

I wanted to let you all know a bit firsthand what's happening here in Algiers, New Orleans. I got here on Monday afternoon, and spent Tuesday at the Common Ground Collective working with some of the volunteers there. The usual cohort of inspired, disenfranchised, enthused activist youth are working their butts off tarping roofs, gathering and distributing supplies (food, cleaning stuff, clothes, linens, etc.) along with the usual cohort of middle-aged activists. It's a beautiful example of human cooperation in a situation that is surreal. Military helicopters fly overhead with their doors open, a soldier with a machine gun visible from the ground. Hummers drive around with an automatic weapon-toting soldier on the roof. Big white SUVs and pickup trucks drive around with various "private contractors."

Houses in flood-affected areas are now being marked with a green or a red dot indicating whether or not it has been condemned, so people are returning to their houses to find that they are not allowed in. How these dots are applied, who decided which houses go and which stay, is not clear to me. It is clear, however, that this is commonly regarded as part of the land grab. Casinos, formerly allowed only on boats in the river,

of the privilege of my "white" skin, or the economic and educational advantages it has brought me.

Anyone who wants an experience of community, of contributing and seeing the direct effect of their participation, or who would like to show their kids some amazing resilience in the face of oppression, come on down to New Orleans and stand with the people here who fear that

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have hurriedly been given permission by the Louisiana legislature to exist on land, and at least one gated community nearby is the expected home to one of these "new" casinos.

Curfew is in effect, dusk to dawn, but white people tend to experience a less hostile response to curfew violation. The New Orleans police, notorious for brutality, have said within my hearing that they can "demand to see ID for no reason at all" and they expect compliance.

Sitting on the levy this evening, looking at the lit city towers across the river with the poverty and disparity that is New Orleans shines as brightly as the city lights.

Anyone interested in helping can visit <http://www.common-groundrelief.org> and even though the mainstream media may not be talking it up, the need continues to be great.

I have rarely been as acutely aware

their disenfranchisement is about to take a profound turn for the worse.

» Wednesday 5 October 2005, 10:47 PM

I'd like to recount one story from my day.

I drove a 58 yr old woman to the FEMA help center around 3 PM. She'd returned from Houston where she'd received one check from FEMA, but another had been sent which she had not received and she wanted to find out where it was.

The FEMA center was in a school gym. We went in, she was seen by the intake worker immediately, a firefighter from New Mexico. He gave her a case number or some such and sent her to speak with someone else. They gave her a FEMA phone number to call and directed her to the phone bank. She then asked me to help her since she was finding the recorded message on the phone to be confusing. I called the number, listened to the message, held for assistance, and

spoke with a woman who told me that this woman needed to call the Help Line by using prompt 3 after the recorded message, this was the Intake Line. I told her that there was no prompt 3 in the message and she told me that must be because the Help Line was too backed up. The woman would have to call back after 10 PM. I asked if we could use one of the computers to find the information online and was told that I could try but it probably wouldn't work. So I used one of the computers there and went to the FEMA site and found that we would not be able to get any information from the website. At this point a FEMA employee, a woman in her 50's, came over to us and said to me, "You can't help this person. We don't accept volunteers." I told her

this situation, I think I'm actually doing a good job of not being way too porous psychically. In other words I could be really way fucked up, and I'm not. ...

There are still soldiers in the street with their AK47s. I've spoken to a few, mostly nice young men who probably joined the service out of a sense that it would be a good thing to do. I heard about soldiers who drove past the Food Not Bombs people (they are mostly young people who come to actions and disasters and feed people) and pointing their machine guns at these kids, just for the heck of it. ...

I also see the potential for great good to come of all this. Some black and white people here are really loving



that I was there helping my friend and she told me "I was told that you are helping people and you can't do that." I assured her that I was only helping this one person and she reluctantly agreed that was OK.

"You're not allowed to help people."

What's wrong with this picture?

» Thursday 6 October 2005, 12:12 AM

It's been a long busy day; hot, humid, and filled with people and their stories. I spent the day mostly at the clinic in the entryway talking with people, and listening. I encountered hope, despair, huge-heartedness, fractured spirits. I heard tales of absolute horror and tales of people discovering compassion and kindness.

I find myself absorbing more of this than is good for me. I have a headache, my startle response is slightly enhanced, and can just tell I'm taking in stuff that is toxic. However, in this environment and

being with how much we are the same, how much we need each other, how wholeness can only exist for some of us if it exists for all of us.

We can really help make a better world for the children (and I mean all the children, not just the white ones or the moneyed ones or whatever) if we are willing to share what we have, live lives of service, and be peacemakers. ...

We need to give give give not 'til it hurts but 'til it makes us whole.

» Thursday 6 October 2005, 7:05 PM

Each day here is a lifetime, and they are each very different. Last night's blog entry, early this morning really, was coming from a place of being overfull from the intensity of the day. Today was a lot mellower, and I am feeling much less stressed. ...

People are returning to the city, many to find that they have lost everything, and I mean every thing. These tend to be older folks since