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In N.O., homeless in our own houses



MIKE MILLER

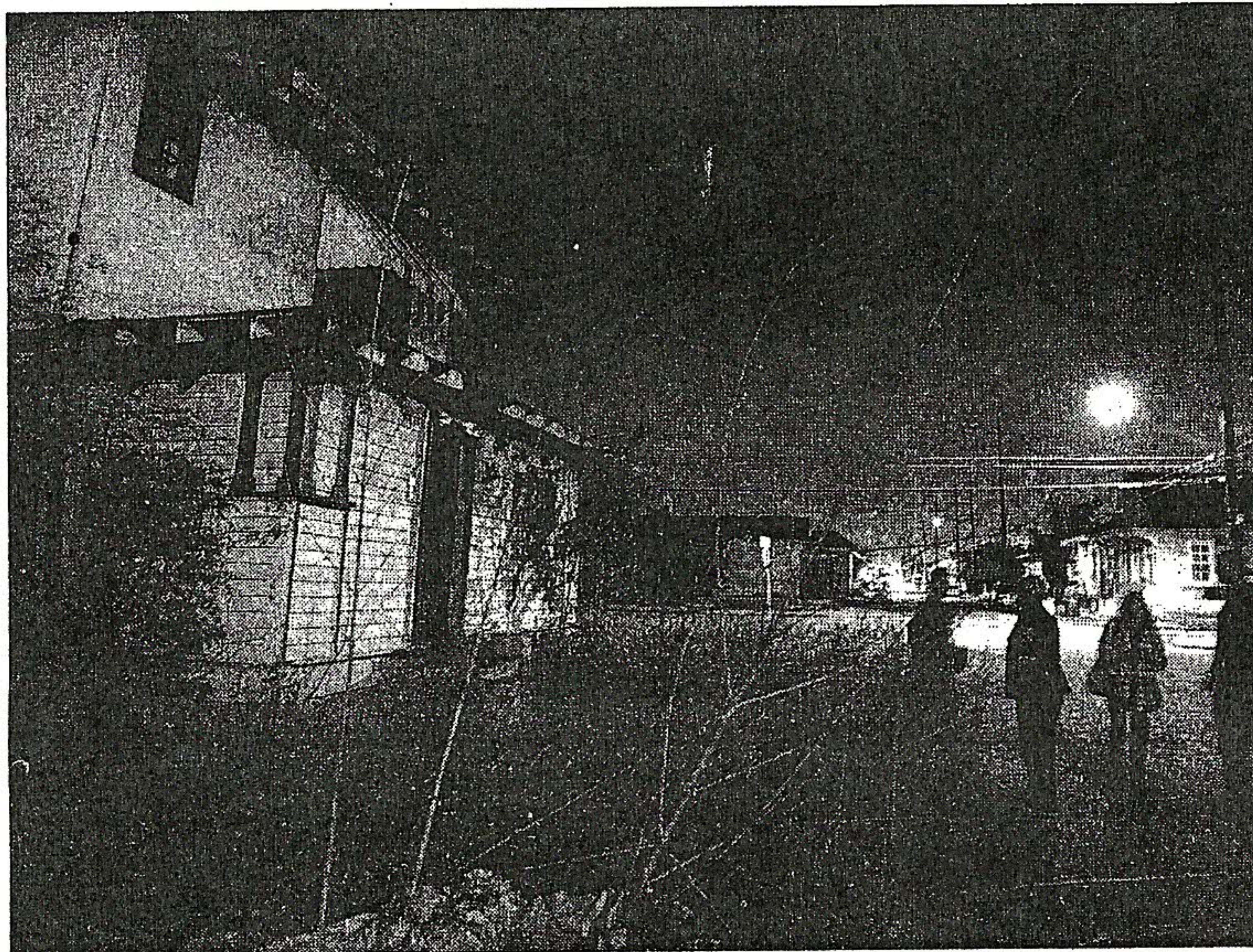
Point of View

During Barack Obama's first visit here as president, he'll again see why we are one of America's most unusual cities, with a most unusual set of circumstances. He'll remember that we sometimes wear masks, we dance at funerals, and we consider food not only sustenance, but essential to community.

While the president is here, we hope he will, like the rest of us, eat a little too much, laugh a little louder than normal and listen to some of the finest music ever created. But we also hope he remembers that we have the curious task of presenting our community as spirited and revived, resilient and fortified, all the while still struggling with overwhelming desperation and need. This is our greatest mask, more impressive than anything worn on Mardi Gras.

Four years after the federal levees failed to protect our homes and neighborhoods, New Orleans continues a valiant struggle. Large swaths of the city remain untouched since Katrina, standing in moldy defiance to the façade of a "rebuilt New Orleans." Turning the music off and removing the mask, the president would see a New Orleans very much in despair.

I'm a homeless outreach worker. For every triumphant story of recovery, I hear dozens of stories of



CHRIS GRANGER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Case workers talk with a couple they found sleeping in an abandoned home near Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans.

continued struggle, pain and despair, while thousands of people remain exiled in the greatest diaspora of Americans in modern times, without homes to return to.

I spend many of my days and nights trying to help people — estimated in the thousands — who are living in abandoned buildings here. I wonder if any other community understands what it means to be homeless in your own home.

We do. I have hundreds of clients who lay their heads each night on a moldy bedroll, tucked deep within the hollows of an abandoned house. Some struggle with the psychic pain of mental illness, not knowing that the earliest clinic appointment we can get for them is months away. We have no in-patient

psychiatric options outside of the Parish Prison. Some clients are so physically wasted, so medically frail, that our intake is cut short by the need to drop them off at an overburdened emergency room, all the while knowing they'll be released without the care they need to survive.

Every day we meet people who have been forgotten and lost in the rebuilding process through no fault of their own. These individuals and families live in circumstances and conditions more commonly associated with countries America gives aid to. Monday I sat down with a mentally ill woman who lives in a two-room house with no electricity, no plumbing, dirt floors, untouched since it was flooded after Katrina. She inherited it from her

father, who passed away before he could rebuild. While she legally owns her dwelling, she lacks the capacity to navigate the reconstruction process. She has seen a counselor before, but it was after she was airlifted to Arizona from the Superdome four long years ago. She has not been able to access treatment in her own community. These challenges are not limited to the poor.

I've watched as friends' and co-workers' marriages have dissolved under the stress and uncertainty of life in post-Katrina New Orleans. One colleague is staying with my family and me as he struggles to rebuild his home. We all have stories of dirty contractors who were more interested in insurance checks than hanging drywall. The smiling faces and the ecstatic populace the president will no doubt encounter here put on masks better than anywhere. We're kind of strange like that.

As the president motorcades through the pot-holed and Katrina-scarred streets of New Orleans, we want him to know that vulnerable Americans are huddled behind the doors of the seemingly abandoned dwellings. But it is not the houses that are abandoned. Rather, it is the mentally ill, the infirm and the elderly forced to live in these conditions who represent the greatest abandonment.

Their intensely individual suffering represents the collective challenges we as a community must unmask to be truly recovered. We dream that the people behind the masks will someday soon be able to wear their own faces, free of tragedy and tears.

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