

OTHER OPINIONS

Under the water line, homeless linger



MIKE MILLER

Point of View

The water line is still there. It's faded now that more than 2 1/2 years have passed since the flood, but you can see it on the posts that support Interstate 10, and it still rings the abandoned buildings that shoulder the road.

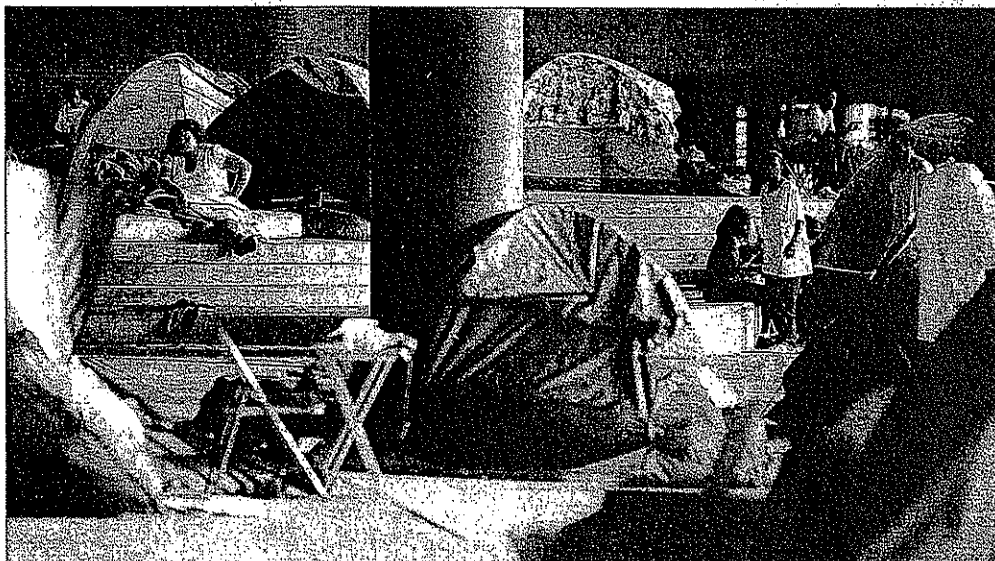
For most, it is barely visible as we speed past the intersection of Canal and Claiborne avenues. For most New Orleanians, the story is not the waterline anymore, but those who dwell beneath it, in tents and on blankets in the now-infamous homeless encampment beneath the overpass.

There is healing power in a home. That faded shotgun with peeling paint and an inviting porch is more than a barrier against the elements. It is a shelter for one's physical and emotional health. It is a place where a diabetic can store his insulin, a schizophrenic can keep and take his medicine. It is a place where a person feels safe and protected from the street. A protected, secure environment is the best prescription against physical deterioration, mental illness and substance abuse.

The homeless encampment at Canal and Claiborne is a direct result of the fragility of our social service systems. It is representative of the mountains that we as a community must move to support our most vulnerable citizens.

Each inhabitant is a neighbor, a brother or sister, a former employee or friend of the family, an old classmate. Each of the inhabitants continues to struggle with debilitating physical and emotional disabilities that challenge his or her ability to survive in post-Katrina New Orleans. Each and every inhabitant needs a home.

There are a lot of stories under Canal and Claiborne. There are a lot of missed connections with family, friends and supports. Most under the bridge have been involved in the hospital system, mental health clinics, substance abuse treatment facilities, social service providers and unfortunately, the criminal justice system. These were



ELIOT KAMENTIZ / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Homeless people camp out under the Interstate 10 overpass along North Claiborne Avenue near Canal Street.

missed opportunities for intervention and missed opportunities for hope.

Ending homelessness in New Orleans, and particularly the encampment at Canal and Claiborne, will necessitate a global approach that includes all these facets of community support and more. It will require a coordination of support services from our mental health clinics, substance abuse facilities, hospitals, courts and non-profits. If we want to end homelessness, then as a community we must decide that home is important to all of us, even our most fragile neighbors.

There are now 84 nighttime residents at the Claiborne encampment — visible progress from a high of almost 200 residents. Our surveys show that 86 percent of the camp residents lived in the New Orleans area prior to the hurricane; the rest are desperately poor people who came to the city looking for work but have been unable, often because of disability, to find work that will pay the rent.

UNITY of Greater New Orleans and our member agencies are working every day in the camp to help people leave, assisted by an outpouring of donations from the community. Our obstacles as an agency and as a community include the dramatic level of disability we encounter in these residents — life-threatening medical conditions such as cancer, heart diseases, and

end-stage kidney disease; impaired intellectual functioning; schizophrenia and major depression that have robbed people of their ability to function; loss of limbs, infectious diseases such as AIDS and hepatitis.

The intersection of Canal and Claiborne is not only representative of the despair and challenges of the homeless. It is an intersection of choices we as a community must make in our continued recovery. This week a delegation of City Council members and other New Orleanians traveled to Washington to lobby for Permanent Supportive Housing rent vouchers as part of hurricane recovery. Permanent supportive housing is a proven, cost-effective solution to homelessness for people with disabilities. It is a simple concept — an affordable apartment linked to case management focused on keeping the tenant stably housed.

As a community, we all need to push to ensure that Congress funds this small request so essential to the rebuilding of our city. These Permanent Supportive Housing vouchers are crucial to providing the healing power of home for the most vulnerable victims of Katrina.

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