



Testimony of Jeff Johnson  
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Before the  
Committee on Homeland Security  
United States House of Representatives

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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member King, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Homeland Security:

My name is Jeff Johnson and I am pleased to appear before you today as the President and CEO of Truth is Power. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to testify on this incredibly important and pressing issue. Hurricane Katrina, and all that came along with the storm, has been labeled as the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States. However, the “greatest” story may very well be *how* the nation’s people and small organizations responded to the needs of the citizens in the Gulf Coast region.

There is a cadre of non-profit and community based organizations that have provided everything from assistance with the identification of basic resources to rebuilding homes and reopening small businesses. Organizations like Common Ground, the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Project Heal are just a few of the organizations that have taken on the Herculean task of providing not only services and resources, but hope to communities throughout the entire Gulf Coast Region.

The People’s Hurricane Relief Fund supports and networks service providers of housing, healthcare, case management, and legal services to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and residents, but do not provide direct services. Their web site states, “We Must Build a Strong, Independent Gulf Coast Self-Determination and Reconstruction Movement so the People Can Decide!” They are calling for the convening of the Second Survivors Assembly on Saturday, August 25th through Tuesday, August 28th, 2007 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Another grassroots organization, the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) was founded to help Louisiana citizens change the balance of power. By empowering more than one hundred grassroots, community organizations, and countless individuals, LEAN has already helped in gaining a tremendous foothold in the war to make Louisiana's communities safer, healthier places to live. LEAN's expanded efforts will ensure that progression continues in the Gulf Coast region.

The fundraising efforts for much of the work that has taken place in the Gulf has been corporate and grassroots driven. The SOS telethon hosted by Black Entertainment Television is just one example of how the corporate community engaged the average consumer to ensure that work to provide relief immediately after the storm did not come to a screeching halt as a result of limited financial resources. This effort by BET, not only raised over \$10 million, but also personified the philanthropic power of celebrity communities that traditionally do not give beyond the borders of their own neighborhoods.

In my capacity as a journalist for BET, I was made aware of efforts of celebrities utilizing their fame and resources to raise awareness and money for the Gulf. There were artists and entertainers who were natives of Mississippi and New Orleans who were anomalies, as they became ambassadors for their hometowns. One more noteworthy, but less heralded, was David Banner. He highlighted the duality and complexity of the hip-hop community in a “pre-Imus” world. Although David Banner has arguably some of the most controversial lyrics in hip-hop, without prompting or convincing he was one of the first people amongst the African American

celebrity community on the ground in Mississippi where very little media attention was given. He galvanized media attention, human resources, and financial resources to provide immediate aid to communities that were not a part of the New Orleans media frenzy. Nearly \$1 million was raised and 18 flat bed trucks full of supplies were sent into Mississippi through his efforts alone. Banner was just one example of several artists within the hip-hop community that stepped up to provide resources in the right places at the right times when the federal government was still making assessments of the damage caused by the hurricane.

As a journalist and organizer, my personal involvement has been in galvanizing students specifically to provide grassroots support to the Gulf Coast and then reporting it. I served as one of the steering committee members of an initiative call Katrina on the Ground. Primarily myself and activist and writer, Kevin Powell of New York, funded the initiative, however students ran it in totality. This student-organized and student-led initiative mobilized over 3,000 students for an alternative Spring Break 2006 to the Gulf Region for the purpose of providing support and increasing capacity to existing organizations on the ground. The students came from all over the Nation as a way to demonstrate that humanity and generosity of the American people extended into a generation that many continue to label lethargic and apathetic.

The students began their service at training in Selma, AL, which served as an introduction for many of them to the reality of what they would see and would experience once they hit the ground in the Gulf. Secondly, the students were provided with an understanding that they were not being deployed to save helpless people, but rather being dispatched to assist a battered set of communities that were resilient in the face of tragedy. Finally, the students were provided base line training in local clean-up, administrative support, and other critical needs. The twenty-something organizer of KOTG, Wesli Spencer, states, “this effort was necessary to show this country the true dedication our generation has to making a difference”.

Additionally, I have the pleasure of serving as the Executive Producer of a documentary produced, shot, and funded by a twenty something medical student displaced by Katrina. *Picking Up the Pieces* chronicles the untold story of how college students in the Gulf region were affected by Katrina. Yasmin Gabriel pulled together several students who share stories of driving across country once to find family members and then again to gain admission into any college or university that will admit them with little to no financial cost. While watching the documentary you are introduced to Patrick Robinson, a 25-year-old student from New Orleans who emotionally recalls his return back to college right before Katrina. He defaulted on his student loans after Katrina due to the expiration of the three-month grace period. He is now working in Baton Rouge with few financial options to return to school. *Picking Up The Pieces* also highlights the struggles of Monique Hill, age 22, who went to Georgia State University after Katrina and after one semester Georgia State attached out of state fees to her tuition and FEMA denied her rental assistance, because neither she nor her roommate could claim head of household. Monique had to drop out of GSU and return to New Orleans to live at home with her parents—only her new home was a FEMA trailer. A young college student’s dream deferred to attend business school in Georgia after graduation.

This documentary does more than illustrate the resilience of America’s students, but serves as a training video for how students and universities should prepare for and respond to natural and

unforeseen disaster situations. The aforementioned projects and initiatives and the students that organized and staffed them should be applauded. However, in some cases they are services that should have been provided or at the very least supported by government resources. In fact, the Department of Homeland Security's Office of the Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding could very well serve as the primary facilitator for such efforts.

During my last visit to New Orleans I was simultaneously encouraged and horrified. It was evident that there was a renewed spirit in the downtown and French Quarter areas of the city that seemed to have revitalized the important tourism industry of the Big Easy. However, there is little easy about the reality of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> ward, Biloxi, MS and countless places between the two that have seen little to no change since the waters receded. There are still communities in FEMA trailers, homeowners unable to gain resources to rebuild, and generational residents indefinitely displaced. This was not the picture of the Gulf I thought we would see over a year later.

In my testimony today, I have attempted to provide you with several examples of private citizens, local organizations, and even large corporations that stepped in to provide service and resources to restore some sense of normalcy and dignity to the proud people of the Gulf. These organizations and programs cannot fulfill the remaining work that must be accomplished without the support of the Federal Government and more specifically, the Department of Homeland Security. The benefit of the existing scenario is that the infrastructure and staff is already in place. In my trainings, I teach that you need the three C's, Commitment, Competence, & Capacity, to have effective impact during any grassroots campaign. The organizations and individuals on the ground have a proven track record of commitment and competence. They are now just in need of the third "C"; Capacity. The Department of Homeland Security should begin identifying resources and developing viable partnerships with proven community based and non-profit organizations to increase the capacity of the work they have done for the last 18 months. Our country must do all it can to not only support, but also reward the civic and humanitarian ingenuity of citizens who have gone above and beyond to ensure the well being of the common man.

The comprehensive work that needs to take place in the Gulf is multi-leveled and complex. I believe that some of the strategy must include but not be limited to,

1. The strategic development of legitimate public & private sector partnerships designed to create long-term economic stability for local communities.
2. The creation of affordable housing development partnerships between the private sector and local CDC 's with percentages of revenue going to the support of local social programs.
3. The distribution of targeted grant funds to increase capacity of local organizations, non-profits, and service providers with proven track records.