

## Queer Katrina: Gender and Sexual Orientation Matters in the Aftermath of the Disaster

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When disasters like Katrina occur they highlight the difficulties individuals face as a result of their perceived gender, race, and age, but also as a result of their sexual orientation. This report documents the particular hardships women faced and their reliance on their own strength and personal networks in order to survive. Often these networks existed as a direct result of family ties, links created in the traditional heterosexual manner, through marriage. Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women, however, are not guaranteed access to the many privileges afforded by a heteronormative lifestyle. When speaking of the challenges “women” face in post-Katrina New Orleans, there are two problematic underlying assumptions: that the category of woman is stable and coherent and that women are heterosexual. Many of the women who were affected by the storm do not fit the traditional heterosexual image of “woman,” and these women not only faced the obstacle of sexism but also homophobia and transphobia as they sought out assistance in the direct aftermath of the disaster.

Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community have faced additional challenges in post-Katrina New Orleans that their heterosexual counterparts were spared. Queer New Orleanians were forced to figure out ways to get around heterosexist assumptions in order to receive much-needed assistance.<sup>1</sup> The belief that a family unit consists of two parents of the opposite sex along with children biologically related to those parents poses a huge problem when it is institutionalized in government agencies whose purpose is to provide aid in the aftermath of a disaster. Unfortunately, the states that were hardest hit by Hurricane

Katrina, including Louisiana, have laws that prohibit same-sex marriages and define marriage and family in traditionally heterosexual terms. The Defense of Marriage Act, adopted in 1996 at the federal level, defines marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman, and allows states to bar recognition of same-sex marriages, which can have far-reaching effects for LGBT families.<sup>2</sup> The following example paints a particularly vivid image: As the storm approaches, one member of a lesbian couple stays behind to watch their house while urging her partner to evacuate. The woman who stayed behind perishes as the house is destroyed by the levee break; however, the house was in that woman’s name. Her partner has no legal right to any insurance claim on the house (the insurance will go to the nearest blood relative of her deceased partner). She has lost her partner, her home, and any financial assistance that would have provided a little comfort during her time of need. This is just one example of the additional difficulties alternative couples and families face in the aftermath of a disaster.

While the traditionally gay male neighborhoods of New Orleans such as the French Quarter, the Marigny, and the Bywater were part of the 20 percent of the city that did not flood badly, the areas with a traditionally high proportion of lesbians and queer people of color, notably Mid-City, were hit hard. Randal Beach, then co-chair of the Lesbian and Gay Community Center of New Orleans, highlights this issue: “A lot of the people whose social activities revolve around the bar scene live in and around the French Quarter, and they were fortunately spared the flooding. But many others in the community—particularly the women’s and trans[gender]

communities—lived in areas that were badly flooded.”<sup>3</sup> Although lesbians, trans women, and queer women of color were disparately affected by the flooding, this fact is often ignored as New Orleans tries to reclaim its gay tourist industry. Pre-Katrina, tens of thousands of mostly gay male tourists would descend upon the city and along with them much-needed dollars for the local economy. Post-Katrina, it has been vital to reassure tourists that the gay parts of New Orleans are unaffected and open for the carefree, good time that has traditionally been associated with the city. This emphasis has resulted in focusing on the unaffected traditionally gay male neighborhoods such as the French Quarter while rendering invisible the suffering of LGBT New Orleanians living elsewhere, consisting predominately of lesbians and African Americans. While, on the one hand, this message is important for the recovery of the New Orleans economy, it also plays a role in misrepresenting the hardships that queer and transgender women of New Orleans face.

Flooded neighborhoods and trying to navigate a legal system built on the assumption of a heteronormative lifestyle were not the only challenges queer women of New Orleans faced post-Katrina. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, transgender women faced particular difficulties, as they were forced to depend on support from a system dependent on a binary structure of gender. Sharli’e Dominique, who is a pre-operative transgender person and lives her life as a woman, was thrown

in jail after taking a shower in the women’s rest room of the shelter at Texas A&M University. After enduring both the trauma of the storm as well as being thrown in jail for the simple act of taking a shower (she had been granted permission by a shelter volunteer before doing so), Dominique finally was able to have her needs met when a former director of an HIV clinic in College Station opened up her home to Dominique so she would not be forced to chose between the men and women’s showers. “Dominique’s case is one of the more dramatic illustrations of how already potent discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens adds an extra layer of burden to LGBT people who are also victims of Hurricane Katrina.”<sup>4</sup>

While disasters like Katrina strike without regard for race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, how those affected are able to recover in the aftermath of such devastation is profoundly influenced by whether or not the survivors fit into the traditional, heterosexual category of “woman.” It is important to remember the unique challenges that women of the LGBT community face in the wake of a disaster and the precious few resources that exist to help them rebuild their lives side-by-side with their heterosexual counterparts. The all volunteer run Lesbian and Gay Community Center of New Orleans is one such resource but is desperately in need of funding to keep its doors open, to advocate on behalf of the LGBT community, and to provide information to the public and LGBT members about LGBT experiences and perspectives.

## Endnotes

- 1 Leap, William L, Ellen Lewin and Natasha Wilson. 2007. “Queering the Disaster: A Presidential Session.” *North American Dialogue* 10.2: 14.
- 2 Ortega, Fidel. Sept. 1, 2005. “Katrina Delivers Second Blow to Gay Families.” *News: 365 Gay The Daily Gay Newspaper*. Accessed 1 March 2008. <<http://www.365gay.com/newscon05/09/090105nolaGay.htm>>
- 3 Wockner, Rex. Dec. 22, 2005. “Gay Life in New Orleans after Katrina.” *News; San Francisco Bay Times*. The Gay/Lesbian/Bi/Trans Newspaper & Events Calendar for the Bay Area. Accessed 1 March 2008. <[http://www.sfbaytimes.com/index.php?sec=article&article\\_id=4438](http://www.sfbaytimes.com/index.php?sec=article&article_id=4438)>
- 4 *San Francisco Bay Times*. “Transgender Katrina Refugee Takes a Shower, Goes to Jail.” *News*: Accessed Sept. 15, 2005. The Gay/Lesbian/Bi/Trans Newspaper & Events Calendar for the Bay Area. Accessed 1 March 2008. <[http://www.sfbaytimes.com/index.php?sec=article&article\\_id=4081](http://www.sfbaytimes.com/index.php?sec=article&article_id=4081)>

## Keeley Williams - First Responder



Keeley Williams has been a nationally registered paramedic for the city of New Orleans for the past eight years. She is certified in swift water and flood rescue, tactical medicine, high angle rescue, and pre-hospital trauma life-support. She is also a field training officer, is certified to teach CPR, and is the first, and only, female S.W.A.T. paramedic for the city. When Hurricane Katrina hit, Williams, like all other first responders, was in New Orleans preparing to deal with the damage of the storm and its aftermath. After helping to evacuate her family, including her domestic partner, to her mother's house in Houston, Williams joined her unit in the Bell South building in New Orleans East and waited for the hurricane to make landfall. She spoke to friends and family Sunday night, August 28th, before losing cell phone service, and then even emergency radio contact with fellow EMS personnel. New Orleans East was one of the first areas of the city to flood and for days Williams' partner was desperate for any information concerning Williams' condition and whereabouts. Williams not only survived the storm, but also assisted countless victims in Katrina's aftermath in a manner that many would call heroic, but to which she modestly says is "just part of the job."

Williams and her partner were living in St. Bernard Parish at the time of the storm and, like many New Orleanians, lost everything to the floodwaters. Also like most New Orleanians, they were left to pick up the pieces and begin navigating the murky waters of federal government assistance. While many New Orleanians experienced anger and frustration dealing with federal agencies such as FEMA, Williams and her partner dealt with specific challenges as a direct result of being a lesbian couple. While registered as domestic partners in the city of New Orleans, they soon realized that the federal government did not recognize their union.

Reflecting on the experience, Williams said "I think a lot . . . a lot of the people we spoke to weren't even educated on anything that had to do with lesbians, gays, transgender people . . . They never dealt with homosexuals before or anything like that. And then you have people calling up and saying 'we're registered in this city as domestic partners,' and they don't even have a clue as to what the domestic partnership is . . ."

Williams went on to say "Yeah . . . so . . . everything had to be filed separately. There was some financial assistance that we didn't qualify for because we weren't married, but like I said, they would turn around and use that [domestic partnership] against us . . . [the federal government] was like 'well, no, you're not legally married, so you don't have access to this,' and then they would turn around and we were trying to get FEMA trailers and they were like, 'well, you guys are in a domestic partnership, so you can only qualify for one trailer' . . . they would recognize it at the government's convenience."

Williams considers herself fortunate to be employed by the city of New Orleans and is clear that on a local level her relationship with her partner has always been respected; however, the federal government was an entirely different matter. "I don't think it would have been as hard for us had we . . . had we been a heterosexual couple, things would have gone a lot smoother."