

“This isn't the America I know...”
A Mother’s Story about Her Son’s Education after Hurricane Katrina
By Kathey Boisseau¹

My son, Benjamin, and I currently live on St. Ann Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. Before we were displaced due to Hurricane Katrina, we lived at 1922 Industry Street in New Orleans, Louisiana.

At the time that Katrina occurred, Benjamin was 14 years old and was attending F.W. Gregory Junior High School in New Orleans. Gregory was a very good school. As a matter of fact, they had just implemented a program where they were prepping you for college and were offering classes in like mechanics and LPN. The school was on one side of the campus. Gilbert Academy, which was associated with Dillard University, was on the other side of the campus. It was a pretty decent school. Benjamin could have stayed there all the way to 12th grade or he could have gone to Warren Easton or some other school.

After Katrina, Benjamin and I were displaced to a hotel in Sardis, Mississippi – a small town in northern Mississippi... 45 minutes outside of Memphis. It was a very, very small town. I didn't even know the town existed until we evacuated. We stayed there about two weeks then relocated to Memphis, TN, where we stayed for almost 14 months. At first, we were living in a hotel right off of Elvis Presley Blvd. They then tried to put us in a shelter. However, the church helped us with housing and we found a house.

Benjamin's education is very important to me, and I ensured that he has remained in school even when we had to evacuate in the aftermath of Katrina. He missed two weeks of school initially, but I enrolled him in school as soon as we moved to Memphis and I must say the people were extremely helpful. They took my word

¹ Kathey Boisseau was a life-long resident of New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina occurred and is one of the named plaintiffs in a lawsuit filed by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund to assure that all New Orleans k-12 students have a school to attend in New Orleans. A copy of the Complaint filed can be found at http://www.naacpldf.org/content/pdf/boisseau/BoisseauVPicard_NOLA_Complaint.pdf.

about Benjamin's grades and didn't ask about any shot records or anything. They basically wanted some type of ID, if we had it, proving that we were from New Orleans and that we were Katrina people. They even gave us school uniforms and everything.

Because we kept moving from place to place, Benjamin attended three different schools in Memphis. The schools were great. Compared to New Orleans, I don't know ... I don't know why I came back. I try not to even ask myself that. Benjamin was in a pretty good school in Memphis.

I returned to New Orleans in September 2006 – the weekend before school started – to work with Project Reconstruct renovating homes and helping to rebuild New Orleans. I was in a training program to learn how to gut houses and hang sheet rock. At first, we lived with my sister in Jefferson Parish, which is



about 25 minutes from New Orleans on the other side of the bridge, and slept on her garage floor. She didn't have enough space so I moved into a homeless shelter. I didn't want my child there so I just decided to let Benjamin stay with my sister.

Benjamin attended John Ehret High School in Jefferson Parish for one quarter. The schools there were up and running. I mean they were doing great. There was a little overcrowding because a lot of the Orleans Parish kids were being bused over there. They had certified teachers and teachers who were still in the unions. They were qualified to teach.

Benjamin moved back to New Orleans with me around the 24th or 26th of January 2007. Trying to get him enrolled in school has been a nightmare. That's the only way I could put it. I wasn't aware that the school system had been broken into three different pieces – three different systems. Nobody told us none of that. When I got

back home, I thought all I needed to do was get his report card from John Ehret and I could go to different schools and register him.



On January 23, 2007, I began contacting schools in Orleans Parish, seeking to enroll Benjamin in the 9th grade. I contacted McDonogh 35, John McDonogh Sr. High School, Warren Easton, Sarah T. Reed, and Priestly. They told us that they weren't taking him because his grade point average had dropped and they weren't taking anything below a 3 point average.² They said, "We don't have the time to do it, we're crowded, we're shorthanded, we're only taking students

that can maintain a certain grade average and they're not going to be a problem."

And then I went to charter schools and, at that time, they said they didn't have any openings. They said they had a waiting list and that they may have some openings after Mardi Gras, which was more than a month away.

On January 23, 2007, I also visited the Recovery School District office at 1641 Poland Avenue. The staff person told me that Benjamin would have to be placed on a waiting list, and that she could not promise that there would be room on February 5th when other schools are scheduled to open. The staff person said that the wait might be "weeks or months". I was persistent and I kept going back and back. Eventually, she wouldn't even let me put his name on the list. She said it made no sense because she didn't have any room. She recommended that I go to some school uptown and that they *might* have a school open. *Might*. It was a headache. It was – it was the worse nightmare I ever went through in my life. I wasn't able to get Benjamin into a school in New Orleans until we filed a lawsuit with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

² The Orleans Parish School Board established admission requirements for the schools that remained under its jurisdiction after the Louisiana Legislature removed its control of most low-performing schools to the state-controlled Recovery School District.

In the school that Benjamin attends now, he hasn't had a math teacher for the last six weeks of school during 2006-2007. I addressed the problem and typed up a letter, which was sent to the Recovery School District. I also brought it to his principal. I then talked to Mr. Michael Haggren, the Chief Academic Officer at the Recovery School District. He promised me that Benjamin would get some type of tutoring over the summer. I went there two or three times but no one ever returned my phone calls.



**Kathey Boisseau, her 15 year-old son, Benjamin,
and her older son, Kevin, an Iraq War veteran.**

I even addressed the problem at an education forum in Washington, DC and told them about the children who were being placed on a waiting list or being shifted from the library to the gym because they didn't have any teachers. I also spoke with our State Representative, and to quite a few other people that I thought would address the problem and would, at least, try to get volunteers in here to open some type of stations where the children could be tutored. But none of that ever happened. I've just got a whole lot of promises.

It's been very, very poor. It's been horrible. The quality of the education here is almost next to none. So, they're promising us that we're going to have better qualified teachers, but I am so afraid that I'm going to be facing the same thing and

I'm trying to find out what my next recourse is. Are they going to give out some type of vouchers so that these kids can go to a private school? The government has to do something. They reneged on the ...money, they reneged on the levees, and now they're going to renege on our children education? To me that's another form of slavery. You know, because if you don't educate these kids, you're going to lose them. So I'm just praying. To be without a math teacher for six weeks straight, that's inconceivable. I can't even picture that.

I just want this problem to be fixed. I do not care about power struggles or politics. I have taken it upon myself to visit the RSD office twice a week to keep abreast of developments, but the stress of this ordeal caused me to be hospitalized due to elevated blood pressure.

I have a son who served eight months in Iraq as a medic. He's a product of the public schools. His uniform had a shoulder patch of the American flag. That flag is supposed to mean something. I find myself asking if we still live in America because this isn't the America I know. The public schools are supposed to welcome every child, but my youngest son, Benjamin, couldn't find a school to take him. I couldn't even get them to provide me with any textbooks or materials to use until I could get him into a school. How can this be? Isn't education a child's right?