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After the Storms: Epilogue

The *Sun Sentinel* team decided it was worth the risk to pursue the FEMA investigation outside of Florida. Managing Editor Sharon Rosenhause supported their conclusion. In summer 2005, the reporters fanned out into neighborhoods—this time, across the country. Database Editor John Maines went to Cleveland, Investigative Reporter Megan O'Matz to Baton Rouge, and Investigative Reporter Sally Kestin to Los Angeles. The team brought in John Burstein, ordinarily a court reporter, to report in Detroit.

The team used the same techniques they had employed in Miami-Dade, again to good effect, but again with some apprehension for their safety. It seemed that the same forces were at work elsewhere in the country as in Miami-Dade—fraud tended to concentrate in poor areas, since FEMA covered only uninsured losses. Kestin recalls reporting in projects in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles: "People were telling me I was crazy, I was going to get myself killed. People that lived there were telling me this."[1] As a precaution, Kestin called her boyfriend in Miami before each interview trip and provided her rental car license plate number, with instructions to call the police if she did not call him again by a set time. Kestin felt most comfortable interviewing women. At one point, however, she approached three men leaning against a car. She recalls:

> These three guys were smoking a joint. It was maybe noon… And I walked up and said hey, you guys, remember the wild fires from 2003? So one guy [said], yeah. I said… Did you get any FEMA money for that?… [He said], no, I was in prison. And the other guy [said], yeah, I was in prison too. I said, OK, have a nice day.

At the same time, Maines was in Cleveland on an unaccustomed assignment. Maines generally concentrated on maps and databases, but now he was knocking on doors. He remarks:

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[1] Author's interview with Sally Kestin, on February 25, 2008, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. All further quotes from Kestin, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

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> I got to see it firsthand and got to see that my reporting skills… haven't gone away completely… And it was interesting just to see it and to hear the stories and to know that the data analysis was correct, that I wasn't wrong. We really hit it on this one.[2]

Each reporter spent about a week investigating in his or her assigned city. The on-site reporting supplemented work Maines had been doing in Florida since early 2005. He had again constructed maps of FEMA claims and compared them to National Weather Service data on storm patterns, as well as consulted other official sources on property damage and fatalities. The team interviewed residents, public officials, local business owners, and community activists to get a clearer picture of the local impact—or lack of it—of disasters dating back several years.

The reporters continued to double check every interview account. Just because few people remembered a disaster several years old did not mean that it had not happened. For example, Maines' research showed that a 2000 rainstorm in Detroit rainstorm had drawn $168.5 million in federal aid—the most disaster relief money FEMA had ever dispensed to date. Yet few people Burstein interviewed remembered the storm—perhaps not that unusual, given the amount of time that had passed. However, contemporaneous press accounts also carried no mention of the event. As Demma notes: "When you have a flood in Detroit that caused $168 million in damage and there isn't one newspaper story about that flood, you have a pretty good idea."[3]

But Burstein was still cautious about drawing the conclusion that fraud was responsible for the payments. He wanted to be absolutely sure. He recalls:

> It's much easier to prove that something did happen than that something didn't happen. And there was always that doubt, like, well, am I talking to the right people? Could it have been a different neighborhood? What am I missing here? I'd say that was the biggest obstacle. You want to be as comprehensive as possible, so someone can't whip out a document later on and say [you're wrong].[4]

It was also a strange assignment because, Burstein notes: "Here's a reporter from Florida, asking people in Detroit about a storm that happened five years ago that they can't remember. And so I got a lot of quizzical looks."

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[2] Author's interview with John Maines, on February 26, 2008, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. All further quotes from Maines, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[3] Author's interview with Joe Demma, on February 25, 2008, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. All further quotes from Demma, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[4] Author's interview with John Burstein, on February 28, 2008, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. All further quotes from Burstein, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Through Maines' data analysis and the team's on-site reporting, the reporters again confirmed millions of dollars of federal disaster aid wasted on communities that had not actually experienced disasters. By summer's end, they had found clear evidence of fraud amounting to at least $15.4 million in the Baton Rouge area, $51.3 million in the Cleveland area, $5.2 million in the Los Angeles area, another $9 million in Miami-Dade, and $168.5 million in Detroit. Applicants had received relief for damage they never incurred from hurricanes, wildfires, floods, severe storms, and tornados.

Investigations Editor Demma was proud of the team's work. He recalls:

> John Maines was in areas in Cleveland that the cops told him not to go into because of his color and because of the danger… John Burstein went in downtown inner city in Detroit. And when the *Detroit Free Press* tried to punch holes in our story, they wound up confirming our story, confirming all our numbers and quoting the actual people that we quoted, because we knew how to find those people but they couldn't go find them on their own.

But as the team considered how to package and when to publish their discoveries, a new disaster was developing at sea. Late August weather reports indicated that Hurricane Katrina, which was heading toward the Gulf coast, would be devastating.

The team hesitated. Those affected by the storm would certainly require FEMA's assistance, and it might appear insensitive, or at best ill-timed, to criticize the agency when many were desperate for its help. Kestin recalls:

> We're all [saying], oh no, here we are about to criticize FEMA for wasting all this money and they're going to be riding in on a white horse and saving all these people in the worst national disaster we've had. And we're going to take all sorts of heat for picking on this agency that's going to end up saving the day.

In the event, however, the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina became infamous. FEMA was widely criticized for its sluggish response to the disaster—in particular in New Orleans, Louisiana, where much of the city was submerged underwater as flood levees broke. Television news was for days dominated by heart-wrenching scenes from poor communities destroyed by the storm. Kestin recalls:

> FEMA crashed and burned and became public enemy Number One. And then that kind of backfired on us and we thought now we've really got to get this thing in the paper fast because we know from our experience in our reporting that the kind of fraud and abuse we've seen is going to be of unimaginable proportions in a disaster like this. And everybody and their

> brother is going to be making FOIA requests of FEMA and every media organization is going to be descending on them and reporting all this fraud and abuse, so let's get this thing in the paper as fast as we can.

The team worked long days, nights, and weekends to push the package into the paper in a period of two weeks. Kestin estimates that such an investigation would normally have taken about four or five weeks to prepare for publication. But on Sunday, September 18, and Monday, September 19, 2005, the *Sun-Sentinel* published the results of the team's investigation. Managing Editor Rosenhause reflects:

> [The story was] a Pulitzer finalist that year. Though it broke my heart to lose, losing to the *Washington Post* for the Abramoff story [exposing a corrupt Washington lobbyist] wasn't too shabby. But I think that we got a lot of respect around the country for the work we did, and… the work we continue to do.[5]

[5] Author's interview with Sharon Rosenhause, on February 28, 2008, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. All further quotes from Rosenhause, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.