"We Are Already Back": The Post-Katrina Struggle for Survival and Community Control in New Orleans East's Vietnamese Community of Versailles

Bethany Li†

INTRODUCTION

This story is about a Vietnamese community in New Orleans East in the neighborhood of Versailles. It could have remained the story of a government failing a community. But this story is ultimately that of a community reclaiming its land, rebuilding its neighborhood, and redefining itself by demanding the government's attention.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005, a community of approximately seven thousand Vietnamese Americans lived in New Orleans East.¹ The community was close knit, but isolated. The devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina, however, changed the way the Versailles community viewed itself in relation to its surroundings and thrust the small Vietnamese community to the forefront of social change and activism.

Now, six years after Katrina, the Vietnamese community of Versailles is highly organized and able to press for social and political change. Soon after the storm, about ninety percent of the Vietnamese community in the neighborhood had returned.² Young people became actively involved in community issues and the elders began to believe that the youth cared about their community. Two new non-profit organizations, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation (CDC) and the Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA) formed in 2006—bringing the total number of non-profit groups focused on New Orleans East to three.³ Joseph Cao became the first

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† Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund Staff Attorney.
2. Id. As of November 2007, one-third of New Orleans' 455,000 residents still had not returned whereas community leaders estimate that ninety percent of the 25,000 Vietnamese Americans in southeastern New Orleans are back. Michael Kunzelman, Vietnamese Americans Rebound After Storm, VA. PILOT & LEDGER-STAR, Nov. 4, 2007.
3. The third non-profit organization in the area is Viet Aid, which was founded in 2000. Interview with Cyndi Nguyen, Executive Dir., Viet Aid, in New Orleans, La. (Feb. 11, 2011).
Vietnamese American to run for office in New Orleans. He was later elected as the first Vietnamese American to Congress. In part, Katrina enabled these changes to occur, yet the story goes much deeper than just the storm.

This Article examines the New Orleans East community post-Katrina as a case study, but more broadly asks what the New Orleans East experience means for other communities organizing around social justice issues. The Vietnamese community in New Orleans East inspires questions that all social justice activists might ask themselves: How do I effect change? How does a community effect change? How do we sustain that change once we have effected it? And why should we care about making that change?

This Article explores how the Vietnamese community of New Orleans East has demanded and effected change and how it continues to do so, seeking to identify factors that have contributed to Versailles' success. Part I provides a history of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East and discusses the effect of Katrina on Asian Americans throughout the Gulf Coast. This Article asserts that the Vietnamese community in Versailles gained control of their community because it insisted on being seen and heard. Part II describes the broad range of changes achieved by the Vietnamese community after its return to New Orleans post-Katrina. Part III relies on interviews from community activists, local leaders, and residents not only to analyze how such large-scale change occurred in such a short period of time, but also to reflect on how the lessons from Versailles relate to other social justice struggles.

I. BACKGROUND

A. The New Orleans East's Vietnamese Community of Versailles

The history of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans traces back to the Communists' rise to power in Vietnam. Migration is not new to this

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4. Kunzelman, supra note 2. Cao came in fifth out of a tight six-person race. Id.
6. Before I go further, I want to address the question of why I wrote this article. I am not Vietnamese American, and I am not from New Orleans, Louisiana. I am a Chinese American from Boston, Massachusetts. But I wrote this article as a social justice activist and civil rights attorney working with Asian immigrant communities on land use, displacement, and environmental justice issues based on the principle that every community should be able to choose what is best for itself. I began this Article as a law student in Professor Mari Matsuda's Asian American and Legal Ideology seminar and updated the Article as an attorney at the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund. For me, the community of Versailles demonstrates the possibilities of what a community—as varied as the views in any and every community can be—speaking for itself can inspire.
7. Telephone Interview with Leo Esclamado, Former Env't Justice Fellow, Nat'l Alliance of Vietnamese Am. Serv. Agencies (Nov. 4, 2007).
community. In 1954, to escape Communist rule, three villages moved together from North to South Vietnam. When Saigon fell in 1975, this community fled from South Vietnam to Fort Chafee, Arkansas. The refugee community organized to remain together through church leadership, and later that year, at the invitation of a Catholic church, settled in New Orleans through a Section 8 affordable housing program. The local name for the Vietnamese neighborhood in New Orleans East, "Versailles," derives from the name of the Section 8 public housing development the Vietnamese community moved into—the Versailles Arms. By the time Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, approximately seven thousand Vietnamese Americans lived within a one-mile square radius from the local Catholic church, making Versailles one of the densest Asian American neighborhoods in the United States.

New Orleans East initially began as an affordable neighborhood that attracted middle-class African Americans, but has grown to encompass approximately thirty to forty neighborhoods. New Orleans East lies between New Orleans proper, which includes the French Quarter and Bourbon Street, and the edge of the Mississippi River. The eastern edge of New Orleans East, where Versailles is located, is where the Vietnamese community lives. Versailles is approximately thirteen miles from downtown New Orleans; the drive to the French Quarter takes approximately twenty-five minutes on the interstate. Versailles is geographically isolated, and few people purposefully travel to the neighborhood. Before the 1960s, the land on which Versailles currently stands was swampland. Residents moved to the area in the 1960s only after the Army Corps of Engineers determined that it could build an effective system of levees.

The Vietnamese believed New Orleans was a good fit for their community because of familiar labor industries, climate, and religion. Having worked similar jobs in Vietnam, the Vietnamese already possessed

8. In fact, one Vietnamese resident in New Orleans believes that the luck of his people is to be “forced to leave behind one life for another” every thirty years, explaining that his Vietnamese community escaped the Japanese occupation in 1945, fled from Communism in Vietnam in 1975, and have had to confront Katrina in 2005. Doug MacCash, Vietnamese Businesses Must Start Over — Again; Many Made Homes in Eastern N.O., TIMES-PICAYUNE, Sept. 18, 2005.
9. Id.
12. Telephone Interview with Leo Esclamado, supra note 7.
13. Telephone Interview with Mai Dang, Cmty. Organizer, Mary Queen of Viet. Cmty. Development Corp. (Nov. 12, 2007).
14. Telephone Interview with Leo Esclamado, supra note 7.
15. Id.
16. Id.
the labor skills necessary for New Orleans' fishing and shrimping industries. These jobs formed the core of the Versailles economy. In addition, small businesses blossomed. Everything residents needed was in the community; they therefore felt little need to become involved in the politics of a government that seemed far removed. New Orleans' history as a Catholic city also resonated with the predominantly Catholic Vietnamese community, as many had escaped from their home country in fear of religious persecution. The Mary Queen of Vietnam Church lies at the heart of the Vietnamese community in Versailles. Other institutions like the Buddhist Temple also play a role in the community.

B. The Effect of Katrina on Asian American Communities

The government's failure to respond adequately to the needs of Gulf Coast residents in the aftermath of Katrina was well documented. Whether the blame fell on Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Brown and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), or Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, public sentiment focused on the Black community affected by the storm. African American celebrities like Spike Lee and Kanye West charged the government and the media with racism against the Gulf Coast's Black community. Media portrayals of African Americans ranged from

17. Id.
18. Telephone Interview with Mai Dang, supra note 13.
19. Telephone Interview with Leo Esclamado, supra note 7.
22. See, e.g., Lisa de Moraes, Kanye West's Torrent of Criticism, Live on NBC, WASH. POST, Sept. 3, 2005, at C01, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300165.html (quoting rapper Kanye West during a live concert fundraiser for Hurricane Katrina victims as stating "I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, 'They're looting.' You see a white family, it says, 'They're looking for food.' And, you know, it's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black... . . . George Bush doesn't care about black people!"); When the Levees Broke (HBO television broadcast 2006).
victims to criminals, supplying the public with abundant images of what living in the predominantly Black Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans meant.

But where were Asian Americans in the disaster? At the time of the storm, approximately fourteen thousand Vietnamese Americans lived in the New Orleans metropolitan area. Despite the widespread impact of Katrina on Asian Americans and their unique challenges following the storm, the media coverage on New Orleans' Asian American communities either was largely absent, or focused primarily on feel-good stories of successful rebuilding. Where the mainstream media left off, the ethnic media tried to fill the void. The latter tracked the effect of Katrina on communities of color, reporting on the unique obstacles Asian Americans faced and the means through which community groups helped hurricane survivors.


24. In a Westlaw keyword search of "Katrina" and "African American" in all newspaper articles between August 2005 and November 2005 resulted in 3,983 articles. A keyword search of "Katrina" and "Asian American" or "Vietnamese" resulted in 726 articles during those same months. This comparison might not be fair given that the African American population in New Orleans is larger than the Asian American population. Still, I find striking that three years after Katrina, I discovered during an informal conversation with students in a law school class focused on Katrina and government accountability that they genuinely did not know Katrina had impacted Asian American communities.

25. The media's failure to portray the complexities behind its Katrina's human drama tales is not unique to the Asian American community although public consciousness of Asian Americans as the "model minority" might have contributed to their invisibility after the storm. Advocates Peter Dreier and John Atlas note: "Even the most sympathetic accounts of Katrina's victims have failed to recognize the key role that political protest and community-based organizing have played in relieving the plight of the hurricane's most vulnerable victims." Peter Dreier & John Atlas, The Missing Katrina Story, TIKKUN, Jan./Feb. 2007, at 24, available at http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/Dreier-Atlas-the-missing-katrina-story. For example, despite ignoring the difficulties of Asian Americans after Katrina, the press chose to feature the "success story" of the self-sufficient Vietnamese community in New Orleans East. Dateline NBC broadcast a twelve-minute segment in June 2007 showcasing how "the Vietnamese Americans . . . turned the worst natural disaster in American history into a success story." Dateline: Postcard from New Orleans (NBC television broadcast June 17, 2007), available at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19292199/). Featured prominently in the segment is then Mary Queen of Vietnam CDC Executive Director Mary Tran—not identified as a leader who mobilized residents to demand that the government recognize the community but as an ordinary victim of the storm. See id. Promoting the stereotypical pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps image of Asian immigrants, the reporter emphasized the community's self-sufficiency, by citing the widespread sentiment that "in times of crisis, God helps those who help themselves." Id. By showcasing the New Orleans Vietnamese community as an individual perseverance story instead of highlighting the amount of organization and strategy that residents put into rebuilding, the more complex story of Asian Americans rebuilding post-Katrina is lost. See id.


One of the biggest obstacles Asian Americans faced when returning to their communities and trying to rebuild their neighborhoods after Katrina was the language barrier, which excluded them from meaningful access to public services. For example, Asian language translations of instructions on applying for assistance were virtually nonexistent. At the urging of national and local community leaders, Representative Mike Honda, the Chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, flagged the problem more than one month after the storm, stating:

[W]ith the AAPI community's resources severely limited throughout the Katrina storm area, the federal government and national assistance organizations must be prepared to accommodate issues involving language access and cultural competence. ... FEMA and American Red Cross must pay equal attention to the victims regardless of their race, ethnicity, and level of income.

Like other Gulf Coast residents, thousands of Asian Americans had lost their homes, businesses, and livelihoods. But Asian Americans faced additional hurdles due to their limited English proficiency.

Furthermore, direct assistance often came slowly, was biased against low-income people, and did not take into account the cultural norms of certain Asian American communities. In places such as Biloxi, Mississippi, where a significant Vietnamese American population resides, FEMA did not erect disaster relief sites until six weeks after Katrina. Additionally, policies on the rebuilding of hurricane-damaged homes effectively barred many Asian Americans from accessing assistance. Despite the severe extent of damage to their homes (some of which were inhabitable), Asian Americans who found temporary housing with family and friends were deemed to be in "permanent housing," and therefore, ineligible for help. Vietnamese Americans were also largely absent from


28. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, Former Head Pastor, Mary Queen of Viet. Church, in New Orleans, La. (Feb. 10, 2011). Father Vien was Head Pastor from 2003 to 2010, and led the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church through the events of this Article.


31. Id.

32. Le, supra note 29.

33. Minh Nguyen, the Executive Director of the Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans, said that during the evacuation when he finally arrived at his brother's home in Lafayette, Louisiana, forty people had jammed into two apartments. Telephone interview with Minh Nguyen, supra note 11.

34. See Sara Catania & Giao Pham, Broken Promise, GAMBIT WEEKLY, Nov. 28, 2006 available
sentries—thereby often invisible to government agencies—because Vietnamese families in communities like Houston, urged by the local Vietnamese radio station, opened their homes to Vietnamese people needing temporary shelter.35

II. COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED CHANGES POST-KATRINA

"We fled Vietnam. We fled New Orleans. Now we're back. We're here to stay."

—Vietnamese resident in Versailles, New Orleans

Following Katrina, the people in Versailles were the same people as before the storm, but the essence of the community had changed. The Versailles neighborhood in New Orleans East went from existing as an isolated community to one that demanded and expected to have a voice at the table. When the city proposed to turn Versailles into green space without acknowledging the thousands who had returned to the neighborhood, Father Luke, assistant pastor of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, declared, "We are already back," reminding officials that rebuilding efforts had already gone underway.

Commenting generally about the New Orleans planning process post-Katrina, City Works Executive Director Jim Livingston said:

I think these grassroots organizations have just turned the entire planning community on its head in terms of how to plan in the future. . . . Before it was sort of a few people making decisions for many, and this is different. It is many people making decisions at the grassroots level, or at least having input on decisions at the grassroots level.38

Reflecting this observation, the Versailles community post-Katrina has gradually strived towards a more grassroots-oriented decision-making process. First, the community demanded that its presence be acknowledged


35. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28. Encouraged by a Vietnamese radio broadcast, Vietnamese families in Houston invited strangers into their homes. Vietnamese evacuees convened at the Hong Kong 4 shopping center and Houston Vietnamese drove by holding up fingers to show how many they could house. "[S]o they just jam in the car and just take off," said Father Vien, "That's how we responded and that's why you couldn't find a Vietnamese in a shelter because the communities pick them up." Id.; see VOICES FROM THE STORM: THE PEOPLE OF NEW ORLEANS ON HURRICANE KATRINA AND ITS AFTERMATH, 196 (Lola Vollen & Chris Ying, eds., 2d ed. 2008) [hereinafter VOICES FROM THE STORM].


in local decision-making. Second, the residents ensured their community remained on the map. Third, they protected the community's space. Finally, new leaders and perspectives on community building have emerged to continually engage residents in planning for their neighborhood's future.

A. Maintaining Community During the Evacuation from New Orleans

Along with most others in New Orleans, the Vietnamese community evacuated to safer shelter when the storm hit. Yet despite being miles from home, people kept in contact through informal networks of friends and family, broadcasts from a Vietnamese radio station, and visits from church leaders. In New Orleans East, one telephone line stayed open and a remaining resident reported updates to a former community member who lived in Dallas, Texas in order to broadcast news over the Vietnamese radio.\(^{39}\)

Minh Nguyen, a college student who would later become the Executive Director of the youth-led Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans, collected these updates about the community and passed them along through emails, Internet forums for Asian Americans from New Orleans, and regional and national listservs.\(^{40}\) Nguyen said that he even snuck back into New Orleans before it officially opened to find out what was happening and photograph what remained. He said that providing updates about the flooding, houses burning, and people struggling to survive was difficult, but that "as an Asian American activist, you've been trained that the media shows things very differently. So I told myself I had to go back and see things for myself."\(^{41}\)

Meanwhile, Father Vien Nguyen, the head pastor of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church at that time, and other assistant priests spent the days following the evacuation of New Orleans, traveling hundreds of miles to visit parishioners at sites in Lafayette, Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Austin, Fort Chaffee, and Little Rock.\(^{42}\) When the storm initially hit on Sunday, August 28th, 2005, Father Vien opened the school and church buildings to hundreds of people who did not want to leave or could not leave. Prior to evacuating himself on the Friday after the storm, Father Vien rode around on a boat taking pictures, knowing that rumors were rampant and people were anxious for information.\(^{43}\) Before each stop, Father Vien would call the local Vietnamese radio station to announce his arrival. During each stop he would update people there, take pictures of

\(^{39}\) Telephone Interview with Minh Nguyen, supra note 11.

\(^{40}\) Id.

\(^{41}\) Id.

\(^{42}\) Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28; see VOICES FROM THE STORM, supra note 35, at 196-97.

\(^{43}\) Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
them, and show pictures taken earlier to people at each subsequent location. In these ways, the Vietnamese residents of Versailles stayed in touch with each other even during the evacuation.

B. The Initial Return: Electricity, Water, and All Other Basic Needs

When the first residents returned to Versailles, the neighborhood was barely habitable. Partly because of its hierarchal and highly organized structure, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church proved instrumental in providing initial survival and rebuilding resources when people first returned to New Orleans. When Mayor Nagin announced that people could return to New Orleans East for a "look and leave" on October 5th of that year, Father Vien immediately convened in Houston a "Return Committee" to which he appointed community leaders and members of the church Pastoral Council. Father Vien acknowledged that the organization was facilitated because the church structure was already in place: "In the Catholic Church, it's very clear who is the leader and there's no question . . . who would be responsible and who people would follow. That helped tremendously."

Neither FEMA nor city officials targeted Versailles as a place for recovery, but residents returned anyway. Father Vien returned to New Orleans on Wednesday, October 5th, with a group of community members and announced mass for the first Sunday after their return by spray painting two plywood boards. At 10AM that Sunday, three hundred people arrived. Father Vien recalled, "It was an extremely touching moment. We didn't know how many people would show up." The next Sunday, eight hundred people went to mass. On the third Sunday, the Church invited the Archbishop, and twenty-two hundred people—Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese—attended mass.

During this period, the church served as a gathering place for supplies and information because it was the only institution open in New Orleans East, aside from the police department operating at half force. People initially stayed in community centers on the West Bank, just across the Mississippi River from downtown New Orleans, but after a few days the

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44. Id.
45. Hill, supra note 36; see Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28; see also Interview with Cyndi Nguyen, supra note 3.
46. VOICES FROM THE STORM, supra note 35, at 209; Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28. The Pastoral Council is an existing executive committee of lay leaders in the church responsible for different zones in New Orleans East.
47. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
49. Id.
50. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
51. Id.
Mary Queen of Vietnam Church set up tents for approximately thirty to forty people.\textsuperscript{52} The community had no electricity at first, and the church ran two generators for people to do things like charge cell phones.\textsuperscript{53} Father Vien organized teams at the church to buy supplies, to distribute them, and to cook meals.\textsuperscript{54} The church also offered health-related services, such as tetanus shots and acupuncture treatment.\textsuperscript{55} Families and friends generally cleaned and gutted their own homes while the church sent volunteers to help discard larger items like refrigerators.\textsuperscript{56} Father Vien tried to make sure the church provided for basic needs to allow people to concentrate on cleaning their homes.\textsuperscript{57} For two to three months, Father Vien and the Pastoral Council met each night to make decisions about who would be responsible for which tasks on the following day. Eventually, the meetings started convening only once per week, and then once per month as people's homes were repaired. By the annual Tet New Year's Festival in February of 2006, Father Vien calculated that ninety-seven percent of the community's homes had been cleaned and were just waiting to dry.\textsuperscript{58}

In November of 2005, Versailles became the first neighborhood in New Orleans East to receive electricity and running water.\textsuperscript{59} According to Father Luke, "Although the church did not flood, it lost about one hundred feet of roofing which caused damage to about half of the church pews. We lived here for one month without power."\textsuperscript{60} Entergy, the local energy utility, hesitated to divert electrical power to a neighborhood where no one had returned. When Father Vien contacted Entergy, its vice president said that the only two full-capacity power stations were channeling all power to the central business district, and that to divert that power to Versailles, the neighborhood needed to justify that enough people had returned. At the next mass, Father Vien announced the need to petition Entergy for electricity and set up a booth at the church where people lined up to sign the petition.\textsuperscript{61} In response to Entergy's request that the neighborhood deliver five hundred signatures, the community delivered one thousand.\textsuperscript{62}

The church was the dominant organization during the initial recovery period, but other non-religious groups also aided the community in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Hill, \textit{supra} note 36; see \textit{VOICES FROM THE STORM}, \textit{supra} note 35, at 209.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, \textit{supra} note 28.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, \textit{supra} note 28.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Hill, \textit{supra} note 36.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Cotton, \textit{supra} note 37.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, \textit{supra} note 28.
\item \textsuperscript{62} \textit{Dateline: Postcard from New Orleans}, \textit{supra} note 25.
\end{itemize}
process. For example, Viet Aid, a social services organization started in 2000 and the only non-profit group in New Orleans East when Katrina hit, opened its doors almost as soon as people were allowed back into the city. In response to Katrina, Viet Aid implemented a program focused on technical assistance during disasters. Viet Aid staff, led by co-founder and Executive Director Cyndi Nguyen who grew up in New Orleans East, helped residents deal with FEMA and apply to the Road Home Program, a federal program that enabled people to get money to rebuild their homes. Nguyen said that because Viet Aid was not connected to the church, the organization had more flexibility in its outreach, which it utilized to forge connections with non-Vietnamese and non-Catholic individuals.

C. Ensuring the Vietnamese Community Remains on the Map

After returning to Versailles in October of 2005, Father Vien and other community leaders soon discovered that the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which advised the rebuilding process, did not include the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East as a region to be rebuilt. The Urban Land Institute, a planning firm brought in by the City of New Orleans to advise on the rebuilding effort, recommended that New Orleans East be turned into green space and an area for water to be drained because the damage in this area was so severe that it would take the most resources to rebuild. These outside planners had determined that rebuilding New Orleans East was unnecessary and the City was ready to accept their recommendation.

Father Vien organized his congregation to go to city hall meetings to oppose the City's decision not to rebuild Versailles. Tuan Nguyen, who returned to New Orleans East in October of 2005 with his family and began working at the CDC in 2007, said, "We were going to these meetings where we were not invited to tell [the City]: 'Don't bulldoze us.' Then we were saying: 'If people are going to come back, they need health care, business, education.' Father Vien noted that "[the City and outside planners'] mistake in terms of sustainability was they didn't consider the social and human factor—whether people wanted to do that or not."

Because of the church's strong influence, Father Vien was able to organize town halls for some residents to determine what they wanted for their community. Father Vien invited his friend Tran Tu, an urban planner

63. Interview with Cyndi Nguyen, supra note 3.
64. Id.
65. Maloney, supra note 38.
66. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
68. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
from Seattle, to arrange a neighborhood planning process. To get people involved, Father Vien made announcements at church. From December of 2005 to January of 2006, nearly one hundred seniors, forty business owners, and sixty youths participated in focus groups to describe their vision of Versailles' future. Seniors asked for a retirement community, explaining that Vietnamese seniors could not eat the food and did not speak the language available at the existing retirement communities open to them. Youth wanted more mainstream businesses in the area. Business owners wanted improvements on storefront facades. Father Vien, local resident Mary Tran, and the planner Tran Tu brought together all of these ideas with thirty architects and engineers from across the country into a charrette. Ultimately, the process yielded four plans that people voted on—by placing a sticker on the plan that they liked best—at the annual Tet New Year's Festival in February of 2006. An architect then incorporated all the comments and votes into the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Report. The Report outlined ideas for an urban farm to grow produce for sale, a school, and a community health clinic. The Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation formed soon after to address the needs identified in these town hall meetings organized by the church.

Meanwhile, in the several months following Katrina, people continued to defy the City's plan to abandon New Orleans East by returning to the community and rebuilding their homes—making an even stronger case that Versailles should remain on the map. People returned for different reasons. Many returned to reunite with family members with whom they could share resources. Others returned because the seafood industry had begun to come back. Some returned because of the church. Mostly, the Vietnamese community returned because Versailles was their home. Gary McMillen, who returned to New Orleans ten months after the storm and leads a local youth group at the Buddhist Temple, said, "You saw miles of
nothing in Black and white communities. When you got to Michoud Boulevard [one of Versailles' main commercial corridors], you saw shops, lights, and schools. . . . I think much of the City Council was afraid of the rapid influx. No community came back harder and faster than the Vietnamese." Answering the question of why people came back, Minh Nguyen replied, "I want to say all of the above. I refuse to believe it was one thing that made people want to come back. . . . Everyone contributed to the folks that came back. It was the sense of community that brought people back. And everyone contributed to it."

**D. "My Back Yard Is Not Your Dumpster!"**: Youth Spark Successful Movement to Oppose Toxic Landfill

While the community fought to be present in the City's rebuilding plans, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)—much like the City—also ignored the existence of the Versailles community. In April of 2006, the DEQ issued an emergency approval allowing for the Chef Menteur landfill, approximately one mile from Versailles, to accept waste from the hurricane. Prior to Katrina, the Chef Menteur landfill would accept only construction and demolition debris, but not more hazardous household waste (e.g., mattresses, carpeting, furniture, treated lumber, painted wood, and asbestos-containing materials) because the landfill was not lined with the material necessary to prevent contamination from the hazardous waste. The Vietnamese and greater New Orleans East community immediately objected. Father Vien said:

> The pit that they're dumping into is thirty feet deep, and they were going to fill it up and pile it up to eight-five to one hundred and five feet tall and then cap it with three feet of dirt. That would be one of the highest structures in New Orleans East. That would be our skyline, our mountain. You have the Sierras, we have the waste dump.

To justify dumping harmful waste into the Chef Menteur site, DEQ Assistant Secretary Chuck Carr Brown explained that the post-Katrina cleanup of New Orleans would take too long if debris had to be hauled outside of the City during an emergency situation, stating, "We understand

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that there are not many people who are going to welcome a disposal facility near them... We also understand we are in an emergency situation and there are 18 million cubic yards of debris left to be removed from the New Orleans area."\textsuperscript{85} He further claimed that Chef Menteur was "environmentally sound" and that debris would be disposed "in a timely and safe manner.\textsuperscript{86}

Versailles residents knew that hazardous waste from the landfill could contaminate their water, which they used to water their vegetable gardens and to grow food that they eat.\textsuperscript{87} The following months erupted in a series of court cases,\textsuperscript{88} demonstrations by residents,\textsuperscript{89} promises by politicians,\textsuperscript{90} City Council resolutions,\textsuperscript{91} and the opening and temporary closing of the Chef Menteur landfill until Mayor Nagin finally ordered the landfill to close permanently on August 15, 2006.\textsuperscript{92}

The landfill fight particularly energized the community.\textsuperscript{93} Mai Dang, a community organizer for National Alliance of Vietnamese American Services Agencies (NAVASA), saw a visible difference even within one summer.\textsuperscript{94} When Dang started organizing community forums at the beginning of the summer of 2006, she began by asking if residents had any

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{85. Press Release, Dep't of Envtl. Quality, \textit{supra} note 82.}
\footnote{86. \textit{Id.}}
\footnote{87. \textit{See John H. Pardue, Dir., La. Water Resources Research Inst., La. State Univ., Anticipating Environmental Problems Facing Hurricane Debris Landfills in New Orleans East. Residents used Pardue's report in opposing DEQ claims that the Chef Menteur landfill was safe for hazardous debris. Interview with Leo Esclamado, \textit{supra} note 7.}}
\footnote{89. On May 10, 2006, more than two hundred residents protested against the landfill on the steps of City Hall. Russell, \textit{supra} note 83. On June 27, 2006, Citizens for a Strong New Orleans East rallied to shut down the Chef Menteur site. Press Release, Citizens for a Strong New Orleans East, Rally in Support of Shutting Down the Chef Menteur Dumpsite (June 26, 2006) (on file with author).}
\footnote{90. Mayor Nagin ordered that Chef Menteur temporarily close in May, but the landfill reopened one day after his reelection. In the \textit{Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina}, \textit{supra} note 88, at 10.}
\footnote{91. In April of 2006, Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis and the City Council passed a resolution urging Mayor Nagin to close the landfill. She also won council approval on May 11, 2006 for a resolution mandating that the Army Corp of Engineers "work with the city ... in creating environmentally safe and effective debris removal strategies, including nighttime hauling, as well as removal of commercial debris and residential, commercial and construction solid waste." Bruce Eggler & Gordon Russell, \textit{Council Suggests Hauling Debris at Night; Strategy May Obviate Need for Chef Landfill}, \textit{Times-Picayune}, May 12, 2006, at 1.}
\footnote{92. The landfill opened in early May of 2006. The mayor ordered the landfill closed about a week later. The mayor allowed the landfill to reopen again on May 21, 2006. Three days later, the mayor shut the site down amid protests. Finally in August of 2006, the mayor issued a cease and desist order to close the Chef Menteur landfill and the Court denied the Waste Management of Louisiana an injunction to reopen the landfill. In the \textit{Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina}, \textit{supra} note 88, at 6-11.}
\footnote{93. Interview with Gary McMillen, \textit{supra} note 20.}
\footnote{94. Telephone Interview with Mai Dang, \textit{supra} note 13.}
\end{footnotes}
comments or thoughts about what should happen. However, Dang said that at the first meeting "[t]here wasn't a single person who raised their hand to say anything." Gary McMillen, who also became actively involved in the campaign, noted, "This was totally new to some people—that you could say no to the police or the mayor!" Yet by the end of the summer, "[o]ver thirty people [were] prepared to get arrested and block trucks."

The Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans, which originally formed in response to the landfill fight, sparked much of the energy that made the campaign successful. Near the end of his last semester of college, Minh Nguyen, who grew up in Versailles, attended a church-organized meeting intended for youth about the landfill intended for youth at the urging of his cousin. He walked out of the meeting after expressing his frustration about the leaders—they seemed indifferent toward what the youth wanted, while at the same time they criticized the youth for not being involved. But an organizer from Philadelphia stopped Nguyen in the parking lot, explained how she was having a hard time organizing the youth as an outsider, and asked Nguyen to remain involved. When Nguyen went back to the meeting, he raised the idea of a youth organization so that youth could have control and a full voice in decision-making. He told the attendees to bring two friends to the next youth-led meeting; thirty people showed up the next Wednesday. In order to elect a board, Nguyen asked them to bring yet another person; fifty people attended the next meeting. After VAYLA elected their board, Nguyen organized a strategic planning meeting, and thus VAYLA became actively involved in the landfill fight.

Nguyen said that the youths were motivated "because young people finally had the opportunity to voice their concerns—to actually stand up for something for the community." VAYLA's message to the youth to get involved was: "If you want the community to stay here, we need to stop this landfill." To recruit youths, VAYLA sent emails and made announcements at the church, the temple, and businesses. The youths organized a voter registration campaign after learning that the City might not have expected resistance for placing a toxic landfill in their

95. Id.
96. Id.
97. Interview with Gary McMillen, supra note 20.
98. Telephone Interview with Mai Dang, supra note 13.
99. Telephone Interview with Minh Nguyen, supra note 11.
100. Id.
101. Id.
102. Id.
103. Id.
104. Telephone Interview with Minh Nguyen, supra note 11.
neighborhood, in part because Vietnamese people were not mobilized to vote. Ultimately two hundred youths—mainly high school and college students—became involved in the landfill campaign. "We had elders, parents, Black, white, Latinos, Catholics, Buddhists, Christians—everybody," said Nguyen.

Bilingual ability in Vietnamese and English thrust the youth into important roles. Nguyen said, "I think this time the leaders and the adults in the community knew that they needed our help because we spoke the language. We could navigate the political system better than the older folks." Father Vien agreed that because most of the people at his church do not speak English, they called the church to give the youth permission to call state representatives and senators on their behalf to oppose the landfill. Father Vien said, "It was fun watching [the youth]. They used their cell phones. One group would receive permission. Another group would call members of the legislature."

In preparation for the major demonstration in front of the landfill, youths from within and outside of the community led and energized the campaign. Mary Tran, who had become the Executive Director of CDC at twenty-five years old, contacted residents to go to the demonstration. Recent college graduates from outside New Orleans sponsored by NAVASA organized media and protest strategies. Youth from the temple joined the protest because they "wanted to add to the number. . . . They wanted to be part of something." VAYLA obtained statements from City Council members who opposed the landfill and enlarged them onto posters for the protest. Gary McMillen provided an account of the event:

Strategizing and planning in the last week of protest against the landfill was symbolic of everything. People came in night and day and we would meet, train people on how to be interviewed, what to do if you go to jail, how to be civilly disobedient. There was a fever pitch. . . . The night before we were going to protest, a City Councilwoman walked in and made a speech. . . . She said, 'Don't protest tomorrow. Give me more time.' [The organizers] said thank you for coming. We're going to be out on the street tomorrow. They said no to that BS. We were so organized and effective.
Because the landfill affected the entire New Orleans East community, the Vietnamese residents also began to reach out to form necessary partnerships with other community groups. Mary Tran stated that Vietnamese community members were cognizant of the dangers of being seen as a model minority.115 For example, she felt that getting assistance was easier because others viewed Asian Americans as a model minority, but she was very conscious of this label because she did not want the Vietnamese community pitted against other communities of color.116 "We don't want it to seem like the Vietnamese community, but the New Orleans East community," said Tran.117 In large part because of the Chef Menteur landfill campaign, the Vietnamese community has built a relationship with the New Orleans East African American community, many of whom acknowledge the role that the Vietnamese played in ensuring that the whole New Orleans East community returned after Katrina.118 Tran reported that they have continued working together on such issues as crime prevention and invite each other to events:119 "[w]e were able to form these partnerships with the New Orleans area—that's how I think we've seen it change."120

By the time the landfill permanently shut down on August 15, 2006, a broad coalition of groups had formed, headed by the Coalition for a Strong New Orleans East and supported by the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, scientists from Louisiana State University, national non-profit organizations, lawyers from all over the country, and media partners.121 CDC staff person Susan Do declared, "To us, this is a victory... Because of us, they closed the landfill."122

E. Community-Based Planning, Civic Participation, and an Organized Response to Another Disaster

New organizations, alliances, and leaders developed as a result of the organizing and activity that followed Katrina. A new approach to government also changed the way in which the community viewed itself. Much of the community building post-Katrina manifested in two new organizations led by self-described youth from the neighborhood. The three organizations that currently serve New Orleans East—CDC, VAYLA, and Viet Aid—have all evolved in response to community need and

115. Telephone Interview with Mary Tran, supra note 70.
116. Id.
117. Id.
118. Id.
119. Id.
120. Id.
121. Telephone Interview with Leo Esclamado, supra note 7.
engagement. In turn, the youth, in particular, and others in the community are beginning to volunteer and give back to Versailles in a way that the youth of previous generations—even a mere ten years ago—were unaware existed.

The CDC, the community development corporation that formed as an outgrowth of the services provided by the church after Katrina, continues to pursue projects based on the vision for the neighborhood developed in its community forums shortly after the return to Versailles at the end of 2005. In the weeks following Katrina, spurred by national organizations like NAVASA, Father Vien recruited locals—like Mary Tran—to help the church in the rebuilding effort. Using the ideas identified at the town hall meetings, the CDC started the Intercultural Charter School in 2009 for children in kindergarten to the fifth grade. Additionally, because no hospitals reopened in the area after Katrina, MQVN CDC spearheaded the opening of geriatric and pediatric community health clinics that now see three hundred patients per month.

The CDC, however, has also had setbacks. For example, the CDC is still struggling to build senior housing. But the CDC continues to try to respond to community needs in various areas. In the aftermath of the BP oil spill in 2010, the CDC started working with fishermen to navigate the oil spill's claims process, and to explore how an aquaculture park that included fish farming could help maintain jobs in the area. Many of the CDC's programs focus on addressing the needs of seniors and business owners in Versailles.

To be more directly connected to the community, CDC Deputy Director Tuan Nguyen said that the CDC is trying to be independent from the church. Nguyen explained that at the church, "If the priest says there's a meeting that [people] should come to, they would come." However, whereas the CDC previously relied on the head pastor's announcements to bring people to meetings, the CDC now does more phone banking and outreach to build ties with the community. Nguyen explained, "We do our own organizing now. . . . We talk to community members that play more of a leadership role and they'll help do some outreach and organize for the events. It makes us connected with the community—much more than before." CDC Workforce Development and Environmental Justice Coordinator Daniel Nguyen agreed: "It is much more process-oriented now.

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123. Telephone Interview with Mary Tran, supra note 70. During the incorporation process for the CDC, when a then twenty-five-year-old Mary Tran asked Father Vien who to list as the director, he responded, "Mary, you're the Executive Director." Id.
125. Id.
126. Interview with Tuan Nguyen, supra note 67.
127. Id.
as opposed to product-oriented. . . . It took a long time to explain to community members . . . that the researchers can't do it without you. Before there was much less need to be process-oriented if you just need to contact the church and have everyone come out."128

Whereas the hierarchal structure of the church may be more conducive to directing outcomes, focusing on helping people unravel how various systems and organizations work, as well as where they fit in the overall scheme, produces both empowerment and understanding. Tap Bui, Health Outreach Coordinator and Community Organizer of the CDC, explained that one of the methods the CDC used recently in the oil spill disaster to help people understand where they could effect change was a "Community Power Map" that outlined the different chains of power linking the community to both the BP oil company and the government, even up to President Obama. While people waited in line to fill out claims for the oil spill, organizers like Bui worked with them to point out where they saw themselves in the power map and talked about where they could exert more influence at different levels of decision-making.129 Although these exercises may not directly spur action, they help individuals better understand how to exert influence and encourage action later.

VAYLA, also led by young people from the community and started after Katrina in 2006, focuses on working with youths to develop a social justice framework for analyzing the local government's unfair treatment of their neighborhood.130 The Youth Advisory Board of VAYLA, which consists of the "original youth"—the six main individuals who originally joined—do much of VAYLA's planning and decision-making.131 VAYLA continues to sponsor a yearly community cleanup program that began after Katrina. Youth from the Buddhist Temple participate in the cleanup day.132 VAYLA also provides a space for youth to hang out, sing, dance, and play sports.133 Some of these activities have translated into fundraisers like the benefit show that raised $2,000 in 2010 to help people affected by the BP oil spill.134 In addition, VAYLA has created a Young Women Leadership Program with over forty girls focused on such issues as body image and gender disparity.135 VAYLA has also concentrated much of its recent

129. Interview with Tap Bui, supra note 124.
132. Interview with Gary McMillen, supra note 20.
133. Interview with Tony Nguyen, supra note 131.
134. Id.
energy on educational equality issues. VAYLA Assistant Director Jacob Cohen noted that particularly after the oil spill, the youth felt a "greater sense of urgency to look at their schools more critically because [they] realized that they might not be able to fall back on seafood industries." The many middle-school youths who joined VAYLA through the landfill fight have entered high school, but they still use that campaign as a reference point to analyze how the neighborhood is targeted.

Mobilizing around the landfill affected [the youth's] consciousness. . . . [In responding to a threat at the local high school], the youth immediately said, "They're trying to dump something on us again." Viet Aid, founded in 2000 and the oldest of the groups, also plays a significant role in providing social services for the New Orleans East community, serving forty-five percent of the Vietnamese residents, forty percent of the African American residents, and a growing number of Latino families and other ethnic groups. Cyndi Nguyen, Viet Aid Executive Director, believes the organization's strength lies in "providing technical assistance with issues that arise." Viet Aid gained expertise in disaster response efforts through its dealings with the Road Home Program post-Katrina, helping people recoup money to rebuild homes. More recently, Viet Aid leveraged this expertise by working on over five hundred claims arising from the BP oil spill, helping people recover money from their economic losses. Viet Aid also has been holding community meetings to determine how to develop eight acres of empty land owned by the church into a community playground and outdoor learning center for children and seniors. Viet Aid has been on the property every Saturday and is trying to get input from as many people as possible.

Despite different focuses and projects, the common theme among these three groups is their insistence on maintaining their ties to the community and their desire to respond directly to community needs. The response to the BP oil spill demonstrates the broader infrastructure now in place in Versailles. The oil spill significantly affected many Vietnamese families that depend on the shrimping and fishing industries for their livelihood. In large part because of the learning experience after Katrina, all three groups immediately began working with families who were affected: VAYLA organized a fundraiser; Viet Aid helped hundreds

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136. Interview with Jacob Cohen, supra note 130.
137. Id.
138. Id.
139. Interview with Cyndi Nguyen, supra note 3.
process claims; and the CDC worked with fisherfolks to create their own union, the United Louisiana Vietnamese American Fisherfolks. The community's organizing and advocacy efforts have also changed the way government responds to a community's needs after a disaster. Father Vien had noticed a difference: "The government is a little better now in terms of dealing with the language access issue. [After Katrina] there was a fight against them. They said you're American now; you should speak English. After the oil spill, there was no longer that argument.... [Language access] wasn't in the structure, but the government was trying to find ways to make it available." Cyndi Nguyen added, "We are more alert in reference to our surroundings. We are more alert in reference to what we're entitled to. We are more alert in reference to organizing.... [N]ow we actually have a collaboration between the schools, the neighborhood associations and the non-profits that are here."

III. HOW DID VERSAILLES CHANGE? WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO OTHER COMMUNITIES?

"There was a shift in the way we viewed city government. We used to view the government as the entity that governs. After Katrina, we viewed the government as the entity that serves. When the government governs, we obey. When the government serves, we are vocal."
—Father Vien Nguyen, Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, Head Pastor 2003-2010

At the time Katrina hit, the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East generally kept to itself. Nearly six years later, the community is a force for social change. Katrina had already placed the Versailles community in fight-for-survival mode. Therefore, when the government added to the community's threat of survival by slating New Orleans East for green space and approving a toxic landfill, people who were already pushed against a wall fought back hard.

Vietnamese residents now expect and demand that they have a voice in decisions about their homes and their neighborhood. Decisions made by the government without any community input forced the previously isolated Versailles community to pay attention to what was happening throughout the City. In addition to the threat of New Orleans East turning into green space and the authorization of a hazardous landfill, rent in the

141. Interview with Tony Nguyen, supra note 131; Interview with Cyndi Nguyen, supra note 3. Interview with Tap Bui, supra note 124.
142. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
143. Interview with Cyndi Nguyen, supra note 3.
144. Telephone Interview with Minh Nguyen, supra note 11.
neighborhood began to increase. Versailles residents could no longer stay isolated. A political shift among the Vietnamese therefore occurred. "This is the first time I've seen a Vietnamese church practicing liberation theology," said James Bui, Gulf Coast Regional Manager of NAVASA.

This Part explores how the Vietnamese American community in Versailles became both politically conscious and politically relevant. Furthermore, this Part examines what about that transformation process is applicable to other communities organizing for social change. Versailles started with invaluable social capital and community resources. Previously dormant or stifled elements (like the community's youth), and new elements (such as outside people and national organizations) combined with existing resources (like church leaders) to respond effectively. Emergency situations like those occurring post-Katrina that helped galvanize Versailles cannot be replicated on a whim. People in Versailles became socially conscious when additional resources and attention were being focused on New Orleans; other communities may not have the same advantages. Yet, the components that contributed to rebuilding Versailles post-Katrina through a community-based approach offer insight into important instruments through which change elsewhere is possible.

A. Shared History and Culture

The community, the cultural infrastructure, and the centrality of the Catholic Church have been essential ingredients for the gains the Versailles community made over the past few years. The Versailles community shares a unique history. Father Vien noted, "This community is still first generation Vietnamese Americans. They have migrated several times in their lives. They have evacuated more times than that because of the war. To evacuate and rebuild was an annual—if not more than once a year—event. So they know what to do." Leo Esclamado, NAVASA Environmental Justice Fellow, said his colleagues often observed that the Versailles community resembled a village out of Vietnam. The community's interconnectedness and self-reliance allowed it to operate independently from other New Orleans communities before the storm. This quality in part also allowed families to return to their homes after Katrina even without initial help from the government.

The Versailles community's shared history in this social change story is an immeasurable element of the community's rebuilding effort, but the

145. Telephone Interview with Mai Dang, supra note 13.
147. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
148. Telephone Interview with Leo Esclamado, supra note 7.
WE ARE ALREADY BACK

desire and need to stay together in the same physical space is universal to many immigrant neighborhoods and enclaves in the United States. Father Vien emphasized, "Here [in Versailles], community is a very strong factor in [people's] decision of where to live. Older people need assistance of community... There's a social structure that they rely on."149 Similarly, in ethnic neighborhoods like Chinatown or Little Tokyo, immigrants and the elderly in particular depend on social and cultural ties. Healthcare, markets, and social services are often not interchangeable for residents of immigrant neighborhoods. Elderly immigrants who do not speak English rely on the connections and daily routines accessible to them in these communities for survival. Even though the history of residents and workers in other immigrant enclaves and communities may not be as intertwined as that of Versailles, people's dependence on the infrastructure and connections supported by these neighborhoods is an important element of the potential of getting people to act.

The benefits of a shared culture or history in organizing also go beyond being identifying connections with neighbors. Spaces for shared cultural practices and celebrations in some ethnic enclaves may present good opportunities to educate and mobilize. For the Vietnamese community in Versailles, church gatherings and celebrations like the Tet New Year festival represent places where church leaders or youth can discuss issues like the landfill campaign. The ability of such cultural celebrations to turn out such large numbers of people proved to be an important resource for Versailles—and can be useful places for outreach in immigrant areas generally. In Versailles, for example, once people gathered, organizers used a series of popular education tools and community forums to raise consciousness.150 Similarly in other communities, using structures from shared cultural practices that are already in place to educate communities could more effectively mobilize people for social change.

B. Strong Leadership

Having a leader from an established institution that people trusted played a pivotal role in keeping the community together and in accomplishing the community's goals. The strong leadership role filled by Father Vien and the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in the Versailles story was particularly invaluable during the storm and the initial rebuilding stage. Father Vien and the associate pastors maintained communication among people from Versailles during Hurricane Katrina. Father Vien also gathered his assistants to return to New Orleans East on the first day allowed and

149. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
150. Telephone Interview with Mai Dang, supra note 13.
immediately called for others to return as well. As Father Vien explained, "You might have a neighborhood association, but that association has no authority over the membership. The church does. So in the neighborhood you can't order people to do this. In the church you can.... There's a stronger sense of coalition.... There's a hierarchy that people follow and that's really helpful." NAVASA community organizer Dang agreed that "[t]he head pastor has a lot to say in a Catholic community."

While people returned to New Orleans East for many reasons, the church leader's urging likely spurred hundreds to return home. Father Vien's influence extended beyond his congregation. When others returned—whether or not they did so in response to the church's call—they returned to a place where others had also come back, which may have further encouraged people to remain. During the initial rebuilding phase, Father Vien ensured that basic supplies were accessible and that the church was where community members could find food or cleaning tools. The expansion of mass at the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church from three hundred people in the first week to eight hundred the next week indicates the church's central role in Versailles, the corresponding weight of its leader, and his successful efforts in recreating a sense of community.

However, the authority of a church or any hierarchal leadership in community planning and organizing may also influence the community in an unintended way. Whereas the hierarchy of the church may have allowed for efficient decision-making during the initial return after Katrina, the community planning and organizing that followed required grassroots organization from the ground up. Father Vien anticipated the church's inability to plan and organize, and created the CDC in response. However because of the centrality of the church, the CDC's approach to community building in the few years after it formed still relied heavily on the church's influence to mobilize people. For example, not until recently has the CDC directly contacted residents to mobilize people for meetings and in so doing has found a closer connection with the community than when it relied more heavily on the church.

This tension is negotiated and debated in many social organizing campaigns. As shown by all of the community leaders in Versailles, successful organizing comes from the community itself. The extent of the roles community-based organizations and leaders play will always be debated. The critical element in Versailles—and for other communities—is that community stakeholders continue to ask and critique whether they and others are responsive to community needs. In social organizing campaigns, both the leader and community must constantly question whether structures put in place to organize people are reflective of the community from the

151. Id.
ground up, and they must be open to adjustment if they are not.

C. New People, New Ideas

Change must be community driven, but introducing new people can often bring in new ideas and skills that help the process. Post-Katrina, national organizations and people from outside of New Orleans began to invest in the City. National attention also provides more resources. For example, Versailles benefited from organizations like NAVASA that sent people to work in the community when they otherwise might not have been able to help.

Father Vien said that people moving in to help with the rebuilding after Katrina helped energize the community:

By the time Katrina hit in 2005, we were a community that was experiencing a lot of brain drain. Not a lot of jobs available for our graduates. After Katrina, we began to see the reverse of brain drain. . . . It was good that these young people came in from elsewhere and there was an influx of new ideas. They knew how to reach out to government and to other groups. I think that was tremendous.152

Gary McMillen agreed with Father Vien: "Katrina put us in the spotlight. College students wanted to come here in droves to do what they could to volunteer. The timing of the [Chef Menteur] dump was perfect for that. It gave people something very specific to attach to and address."153

New people and national organizations that give space to local people to lead can effectively support local campaigns with critical skills. McMillen observed that the landfill campaign was particularly dependent on the skill of "smart educated Vietnamese activists" coming to New Orleans from other places:

The Vietnamese community had been passive, disinterested, not engaged for decades. There was no participation until outside people came in and stirred shit up. It would not have happened—Minh, me, the priest. It was people from Massachusetts, California. . . . [These activists] started putting things together at levels that we had never imagined. They had someone working the media. We didn't know how to do that. And slowly we got to the front page. People inside became willing participants but we didn't have the skill set they had. We were willing to fight, but we didn't know how to do it effectively to have a significant impact.154

Even now, VAYLA continues to push for national support and investment in the Gulf Coast by publicizing programs such as its

152. Interview with Father Vien Nguyen, supra note 28.
153. Interview with Gary McMillen, supra note 20.
154. Id.
educational equity work. One of its staff members, Jacob Cohen, arrived from California and continues to pull friends from outside New Orleans to help the youth with things like film projects.\textsuperscript{155} Minh Nguyen, who has spent a lot of time meeting with leaders in other parts of the country and publicizing VAYLA's work on social networking sites, said, "There's not a lot of investment in the Gulf Coast. We want to make sure that we're known. Create this voice. Your Asian brothers and sisters in the Gulf need help. Don't forget about us. That has been my message for a long time."\textsuperscript{156}

Support from outside the community can provide valuable skills and resources to social justice campaigns. These perspectives may not always be welcome and sometimes can be overpowering, but if outsiders understand that decisions should be community-driven, then the collaboration could be beneficial. For example, Minh Nguyen initially became involved in the landfill campaign when a youth organizer from Philadelphia recognized that she did not have the same relationships that Minh had. Additionally, organizers sponsored by NAVASA supported the community's desire to opposing the landfill by reaching out to the media. Likewise, communities trying to organize may want to reach out to people outside of their immediate neighborhood to add valuable skills and inject new ideas.

\textit{D. Bicultural, Bilingual Youth Activism}

One of the key factors in the change in Versailles is the breadth and energy of youth involvement and leadership after Katrina. The youth organization VAYLA began because of the landfill and Minh Nguyen's insistence that local youth needed a voice in the community's future development and recovery. Moreover, the leadership at VAYLA and the CDC is comprised of young people in their twenties and thirties, most of whom grew up in the community and can speak both Vietnamese and English. While the bilingual ability of these young leaders is critical, the bicultural understanding that they bring to their decision-making and community organizing is just as important. Not only can the youth communicate, they also understand and can negotiate the role that elders, the church, the Buddhist temple, and other stakeholders play in the community while also understanding how the American government operates.

Many young people helped rebuild the homes destroyed by Katrina. By extension when the landfill fight began, the youth quickly realized that their community was once again under threat. Jacob Cohen noted, "Kids were pouring their blood and sweat into rebuilding properties and

\textsuperscript{155} Interview with Jacob Cohen, \textit{supra} note 130.
\textsuperscript{156} Telephone Interview with Minh Nguyen, \textit{supra} note 11.
institutions. It wasn't all that abstract.157

After Katrina, established community leaders finally gave the youth space to gain organizational experience, allowing a new generation of leaders to grow. During the landfill fight, the youth in Versailles took charge of many actions against the City. Leo Esclamado wondered whether this shift in leadership happened because "there was this avenue for youth to actively participate in a meaningful way."158 Father Vien said, "Pre-Katrina, the youth were looked upon primarily as a lost generation who were neither Americans nor Vietnamese, who had no directions in life. But now they are looked upon as people who really care for community. . . ."159 Overcoming those stereotypes and misconceptions about the youth as being irresponsible was important in sustaining the community. Particularly after the landfill fight, more youth began taking an active involvement in the leadership of the community. This was begun when Minh Nguyen noted that the elders in the community needed help navigating the political system.160 Because the community's youth were bilingual and bicultural, they were able to step into that role.161 As a result, people like Mary Tran stepped up to become leaders because of their strong interest in the community's revitalization and deep understandings of the community's history and motivations.

In all organizing campaigns, training the next generation of leaders is important. This element often gets lost because of the already long list of tasks to accomplish. Hiring young interns is a good beginning. It adds capacity for the campaign, and helps youth develop skills in communication, public speaking, language, political processes, and media. Youth groups also further this development. As evidenced through the New Orleans East landfill fight, incorporating youth into a coalition not only trains new leadership, but may also inspire new energy.

E. Building Coalitions

As with many emergency campaigns, the landfill quickly galvanized groups that previously distrusted or had no connection with one another—both inside and outside of Versailles. Although historical tensions and suspicions did not immediately dissipate, new relationships formed in the fight against the landfill, and different groups (such as seniors, youth, Catholics, Buddhists, Vietnamese, African Americans, and Latinos) worked together. Additionally, Versailles began to see itself connected to a

157. Interview with Jacob Cohen, supra note 130.
158. Telephone Interview with Leo Esclamado, supra note 7.
160. Telephone Interview with Minh Nguyen, supra note 11.
161. Id.
community that went beyond its own neighborhood.

The youth recruited people in the community beyond members of the Catholic Church. For example, NAVASA organizers and VAYLA youth actively connected with adults and youth at the local Buddhist Temple. \(^{162}\) Gary McMillen can relate his experiences: "I was fortunate enough that people [like Mai, Leo, and Minh] reached out to me to participate. All of a sudden I was taking off work and going to court. I was for the first time asked for my opinion."\(^{163}\) Consequently even though many from the Buddhist Temple did not actively participate throughout the landfill campaign, when the major protest occurred, youths from the Temple joined the protest in front of the landfill and several adults joined the group going to the courthouse. After explaining the potential consequences of the landfill action to parents at the Temple, McMillen said, "To my pleasant surprise they said, 'Do it.' Two of the parents came and signed paperwork about how to get bailed out of jail."\(^{164}\) Some of those relationships continue today through activities like the annual Community Clean-Up Day sponsored by VAYLA.\(^{165}\)

Particularly because of the landfill campaign, community leaders and Versailles seniors also expanded who they saw as their allies in the fight against the City. In the first fights at City Hall post-Katrina, when Versailles residents initially went to a City meeting about green space, they seemed to be thinking first and foremost about protecting the Versailles community. Eventually, they came to understand that their advocacy against turning New Orleans East into green space also affected and helped residents outside the Versailles community in moving back to the area. This sense of interconnectedness may have helped pave the way for greater cooperation with other groups when the landfill also threatened New Orleans East residents. Tran admitted, "With the Chef Menteur landfill [controversy], we had to step out of our cover and go to City Hall and protest. It changed the community—how we see things."\(^{166}\) Ironically, whereas the insularity of the community enabled residents to come together and return, they soon found that reaching beyond their community ensured that they could stay. Cyndi Nguyen said that even now she continues to make sure her organization reaches outside of Versailles: "We gotta go beyond the Michoud Boulevard. I do work in the Lower Ninth Ward. Viet wants to make sure we support and participate in City-wide recovery and not just our own recovery off the Michoud."\(^{167}\)

\(^{162}\) Interview with Gary McMillen, supra note 20.

\(^{163}\) Id.

\(^{164}\) Id.

\(^{165}\) Id.

\(^{166}\) Interview with Mary Tran, supra note 70.

\(^{167}\) Interview with Cyndi Nguyen, supra note 3.
Perhaps because of the greater youth involvement and connections to people outside of Versailles, Vietnamese residents and allies were breaking down structural barriers that had previously prevented participation in the broader New Orleans community. Previously, City officials had never intentionally distributed information to the Versailles community.\footnote{68} Allies outside of the community, like the urban planner from Seattle, who helped stop New Orleans East from becoming a green space, and the youth inside the community, who became actively involved in efforts to protect Versailles, acted as conduits linking Versailles to the greater New Orleans community and further to the rest of the world. The seniors in the community now had ready access to information thanks to new allies who were bicultural and bilingual.

Critical for all social change movements, building coalitions within and outside of Versailles expanded the community's base of information and resources. The Community leaders' and the seniors' faith in the youth helped bring on other allies, such as the Buddhist Temple. Learning from people with skills in organizing protests and expertise in planning helped expand the community's knowledge base and capacity in these areas. Consequently, the community could promptly respond to such crises as the Chef Menteur landfill when it previously may not have even had the skills and expertise necessary to cope. Building coalitions and outreach helps organize, share ideas, and expand skills.

\section*{F. Community-Led Change}

The root of any change comes from the community. Tellingly, a youth organizer from Philadelphia could not effectively organize youth because she did not know who to reach out to in Versailles.\footnote{69} However, when that youth organizer connected with Minh Nguyen, Nguyen was able to draw on his personal connections and understanding of the youth in Versailles to motivate people's involvement with VAYLA and the landfill fight.\footnote{70}

The resources and assistance of a national organization like NAVASA are certainly key—especially when government assistance is ineffective or nonexistent—but community members like Minh Nguyen and Mary Tran are the people who are fully invested in rebuilding a neighborhood because that is their home. They remain in New Orleans East, long after the shorter-term national rebuilding efforts have ended.

Organizations and community leaders are trying to hold both themselves and the government accountable to community-driven decisions and change. Staff at the CDC, VAYLA, and Viet Aid continually speak
about making personal connections and holding community meetings to better understand community needs. Moreover, after witnessing how the government can fail a community, the people in Versailles also learned how to make the government listen to a community. Some improvements were seen in the government’s approach with Versailles in the aftermath of the BP oil spill, such as language access being less of an issue than after Katrina. As Minh Nguyen has reflected, "Things can change but it needs to come from the community itself. There needs to be a democratic process and very transparent. It needs a lot of leadership development. A lot of trust. And a lot of support."\(^{171}\)

**G. Sustaining Momentum**

Emergencies and immediate threats to communities may bring people together, but once those emergencies are resolved, things often return to the status quo. People must be conscious about sustaining elements that helped to push change. In Versailles, the community is no longer as active as it was once the landfill closed because the immediate threat ended.\(^{172}\) Youth are not as involved in VAYLA as when the organization first began.\(^{173}\) Despite planning Community Clean-Up Day with a broader coalition of groups like the Black and Hispanic Homeowners' Association, Vietnamese people remain the main participants on the actual day.\(^{174}\) McMillen recognized, "We have to be guarded and mindful of not slipping back to the old, disinterested, passive ways."\(^{175}\)

Even so, almost six years after Katrina, Versailles has been transformed. Because of the excitement and magnetism of past social justice campaigns in the community, more youths volunteer now than ever—before Katrina, community service was rarely emphasized.\(^{176}\) Viet Aid now actively builds coalitions with people of different ethnicities and religions on common issues such as education.\(^{177}\) The Buddhist Temple continues to educate its youth about social change movements in current events through weekly open mic forums.\(^{178}\) VAYLA keeps national, regional, and local allies updated through social networking.\(^{179}\) The CDC is beginning to make stronger, more direct connections with groups like the fisherfolk affected by the oil spill.\(^{180}\) The community's story has not ended

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171. Telephone Interview with Minh Nguyen, *supra* note 11.
175. *Id.*
176. Interview with Tuan Nguyen, *supra* note 67.
177. Interview with Cyndi Nguyen, *supra* note 3.
179. Telephone Interview with Minh Nguyen, *supra* note 11.
180. Interview with Tap Bui, *supra* note 124.
with opposing only the immediate challenges, but has continued by incorporating many of the elements from the effective post-Katrina rebuilding effort into current services for the neighborhood and into community organizing. Likewise, communities engaged in social organizing campaigns must find specific means to sustain changes.

CONCLUSION

Marginalizing communities of color is not new in Louisiana. However, the community of Versailles understood that survival meant that residents—and not government officials—needed to take ownership over community development, planning, and scarce resources. The community insisted on remaining, and through many avenues has continued to shape Versailles into what it believes is an ideal neighborhood. To achieve this ideal, Versailles residents strive towards cooperation, connection, and community.

People in Versailles resisted government control over the future of its people and its homes. The community reclaimed its voice in its struggle for survival. The Versailles residents affirmed their responsibility to care for each other and for their environment. Through their story, the people of Versailles remind us of what community really means.