THROUGH HELL AND HIGH WATER:
A LIBRARIAN’S AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNITY
RESILIENCE AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA

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Introduction
Ten years ago, my understanding of librarianship and information science was changed forever by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. On Friday, August 26, 2005, I walked out of my library without knowing that it would be more than two months before I would see it again. Critical reflection on the experiences occurring during that period played a pivotal role in shaping my views about libraries’ potential as a source of community resilience during and after periods of intense crisis. This autoethnography examines the role of a school library during the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita using the community resiliency model developed by Fran H. Norris et al. (2008) as a framework for reflection and analysis.

Holy Cross School for Boys
When the school year started in August 2005, I was the head librarian at the Catholic Holy Cross School for Boys (fifth through twelfth grade) located in the Lower Ninth Ward neighbourhood of New Orleans, Louisiana. The Holy Cross campus was a special place, nestled between the Mississippi River and the Intracoastal Canal and located under stately oak trees. The Lower Ninth Ward is now a lower-income, mostly African-American, neighbourhood—though this was not always the case. Juliette Landphair (2007) describes the demographic and socioeconomic shift that occurred in the community between 1940 and 1970: the “nonwhite population … rose from 31 percent to 73 percent, and by 1970, 28 percent of Lower Ninth Ward families lived below the poverty line. By 2000, approximately 90 percent of the Lower Ninth Ward was African American, and 33 percent lived in poverty” (842). Even though Holy Cross was located in a predominately African-American neighbourhood, its close proximity to St. Bernard Parish and the change in population that
occurred in the Lower Ninth Ward itself resulted in Holy Cross being one of the more racially diverse schools in the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

History of the School

After founding the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana in 1842, members of the Congregation of Holy Cross migrated to New Orleans. In 1849, by invitation of the Archbishop of New Orleans, five brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross were sent by Father Basil Moreau to assume responsibility for St. Mary’s Orphanage. In that same year, they founded the Holy Cross School for Boys (Holy Cross School n.d.). Reynes Farm (a former riverfront plantation) was purchased by the congregation. When the need for an orphanage waned, the congregation opened St. Isidore’s College as a boarding and day school. The Reynes Farm location served as the home of Holy Cross School for over 150 years. In 2007, the school was relocated to a site in Gentilly in response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and in order to continue its mission (Holy Cross School n.d.). The new campus opened in March 2010, less than five years after Hurricane Katrina.

The Holy Cross School community is unique in New Orleans. In addition to its location in the city, Holy Cross was the only middle and high school for boys, providing an education that the school refers to as “Boys to Men” with the motto, “Become the Man You Are.” Over half of the boys are legacy students, “having followed a great grandfather, grandfather, or father to Holy Cross” (Holy Cross School n.d.). Next year, Holy Cross plans on adding an elementary school, further distinguishing it from other local institutions. As

1 Except where noted otherwise, photo credits by Beth Patin.
the school librarian, I was able to see how these familial and community networks were strengthened through intergenerational connections at the school and also because many of the boys attended Holy Cross throughout their middle and high school years, an experience few students in New Orleans have.

**Hurricane Katrina**

On the morning of August 23, 2005, Tropical Depression Twelve formed over the south-eastern Bahamas and on August 24, it was named Tropical Storm Katrina. Tropical Storm Katrina picked up strength and was upgraded to a “Category 1 Hurricane” just before it made landfall in Florida on August 25, 2005. As Hurricane Katrina moved into the Gulf of Mexico, the warm waters facilitated rapid growth in the size of the storm as well as a massive surge in its intensity. Hurricane Katrina moved to “Category 5” status on the Saffir-Simpson Wind Scale on the morning of August 28, and it reached its peak strength later that day, with maximum sustained winds of 175 mph. The pressure measurement made Katrina the fourth most intense Atlantic hurricane on record at the time, only to be surpassed by Hurricanes Rita and Wilma later in the season; it was also the strongest hurricane recorded in the Gulf of Mexico to that date (National Hurricane Center 2005). After weakening, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29 as a “Category 3 Hurricane,” with sustained winds of 125 mph (200 km/h) near Buras-Triumph, Louisiana. At landfall, hurricane-force winds extended outward 120 miles (190 km) and the storm’s central pressure was 920 mbar (27 inHg). Hurricane Katrina maintained strength well into the state of Mississippi, finally losing hurricane strength more than 150 miles (240 km) inland near Meridian, Mississippi.

Hurricane Katrina’s storm surge caused fifty-three different levee breaches in greater New Orleans, submerging eighty percent of the city and devastating the entire Gulf Coast. It has been measured as the most costly disaster in United States history. The Bush Administration sought $105 billion for repairs and reconstruction in the region, which did not take into account damage to the oil supply or highway infrastructure (St. Onge and Epstein 2006). Hurricane Katrina displaced over one million people from the central Gulf coast to elsewhere across the United States, which became the largest diaspora in the history of the nation (Ladd et al. 2007). By the end of January 2006, about 200,000 people were once again living in New Orleans, less than half the pre-storm population (Stone et al. 2006). The US Geological Survey estimated that 217 sq. mi. (560 km²) of land was transformed to water by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Many people lost their lives as a result of Katrina as well. The confirmed death toll is 1,836, with one fatality in Kentucky, two
each in Alabama, Georgia, and Ohio, fourteen in Florida, 238 in Mississippi, and 1,577 in Louisiana (Beven et al. 2010).

**Libraries and Crisis**

Most literature about disasters in Library and Information Science (LIS) focuses on the preservation of materials and on events that affect the library itself, such as fire, water damage, and mould (Zach and McKnight 2010). However, a new focus is emerging: that of libraries’ roles during crises in the community, such as tornadoes and other storms (Jaeger et al. 2006; Stewart 2014; Veil and Bishop 2014). This marks a shift from a building-centric focus (or how to preserve library resources) to a community-centric focus (on how to provide services when communities need them most). However, much of the new research recognizing the roles libraries play in disaster situations has remained “silied” in the LIS literature. As evidence, when Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) director David Paulson was asked about the role public libraries might play in disasters, he said, “I think you are really on to something there, I mean, where else are they going to go? Libraries have backup generators for power, they have the Internet, they have people who will help you. I guess we never really thought of the role libraries could play” (Veil and Bishop 2012). This is a concern, especially since FEMA’s 2010 revisions to the Stafford Act have designated public libraries as essential community organizations.

While FEMA might not be aware of it, research in LIS has shown that community members do seek out library services during disasters. Skinner (2008) reported that thirty-five percent of Louisiana public libraries were closed following Hurricane Katrina; however, there was a scant one percent reduction in visits, pointing to a reliance on this public infrastructure during the immediate rebuilding. After Hurricane Sandy hit the east coast, the Princeton Public Library in New Jersey had over 2,000 more patron visits than average (Bayliss 2012). The most extensive research pointing to libraries’ roles after disasters was conducted after the 2004–2005 hurricanes, which identified a variety of services that were provided by the libraries (Jaeger et al. 2006). The most commonly identified uses for libraries included using the Internet to talk to family and friends, researching the disaster, and filling out FEMA and insurance forms. However, a wide variety of other services were identified as well. These included responding to information inquiries, creating community contact centres, staffing shelters in the library buildings, housing city command centres, distributing food and supplies, providing power to recharge electronics, assisting with FEMA, insurance, and other paperwork, providing library
materials to evacuees in shelters, and offering meeting space for emergency responders.

The National Library of Medicine’s oral history project identified seven roles librarians already perform that could be adapted to support disaster management. These roles include institutional supporters, collection managers, information disseminators, internal planners, educators and trainers, and information community builders (Featherstone et al. 2008). Bishop and Veil (2013) suggest ways that librarians should prepare for or act during an emergency: 1. Develop a disaster plan to include ways the library can assist the community; 2. Regularly update emergency contact information; 3. Work with emergency response managers to integrate public libraries into the existing community disaster planning framework; and 4. Document the number of users assisted in disasters to provide clear evidence of libraries’ contributions. Building on this list of preparations for emergencies, after the tornadoes hit the South-eastern United States on April 27, 2011, Veil and Bishop (2014) conducted interviews with librarians and identified opportunities for libraries to enhance community resilience—for instance, by offering technology resources and assistance; providing office, meeting, and community living room space; serving as the last redundant communication channel and a repository for community information and disaster narratives; and adapting or expanding services already offered to meet the changing needs of the community. This growing body of empirical evidence corroborates the importance of libraries during disasters.

Community Resiliency

Resilience in disaster

The concept of resilience stems from mathematics and physics. Crawford Holling (1973) used mathematical models of natural systems to determine the characteristics that make them adaptive and resilient. This work was important for his field of ecology, but has grown to become the basis for our concept of resiliency in both natural and social science. A resilient system is “one that can withstand shocks and surprises, absorb extreme stresses, and maintain its core functions, though perhaps in an altered form” (Innes and Booher 2010, 205).

Some of the different theoretical discussions about resilience have focused on:

- whether resilience is an outcome (Tierney and Bruneau 2007) or a process (Norris et al. 2008) or both (Cutter et al. 2008);
• what type of resilience is being addressed: physical (Bodin and Wiman 2004; Gordon 1978) economic, infrastructure (Scholl and Patin 2013), ecological (Holling 1973; Klein, Nicholls, and Thomalla 2003; Longstaff et al. 2010), or psychological;
• communities; and,
• what policy realm should be the focus of study (Norris et al. 2008).

“Community resilience” has been defined as a community’s ability to strengthen its response to deal with crises or disruptions (Colten and Sumpter 2009). It is important to note the differences between resilience and mitigation. Mitigation strategies are based on reducing the impact of hazards, whereas resistance strategies aim to prevent the occurrence of hazards. By contrast, resilience assumes that hazards or disasters cannot be prevented, but that a community can be equipped with information in order to enhance the ability to anticipate threats, reduce vulnerability, and respond to and recover from hazard events when they occur. Ann Carpenter (2015) describes both physical and social elements in community resilience; physical resilience can be measured by the severity of the damage and the amount of time it takes to return to normal after the shock. Social resilience describes how quickly individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions respond to external or internal shocks. In sum, a resilient community is one that is able to bounce back from an event. It might not necessarily return to its previous state, but instead, establish a new, functional normal.

Community resilience

There are many factors that contribute to a community’s ability to become resilient. This research utilizes the factors of network adaptive capacities (Norris et al. 2008), including economic development, social capital, community competence, and information and communication capabilities. The theory of community resilience will be used as a framework for critical reflection contributing to the analysis of this work.

In their framework, Norris et al. (2008) define resilience as a measure of how well communities adapt, but that resilience requires a conscious effort and must be maintained over time. Robustness, redundancy, and rapidity are all seen as dynamic attributes of resilient communities. Robustness measures the strength of resources in the community and considers their probability of deterioration. Redundancy measures the extent to which elements are sustainable in the event of a disaster or crisis. Finally, rapidity refers to how
quickly the capacities in the community can be accessed and used or mobilized. This research identified four interconnecting capacities of a community that can affect its overall resiliency: 1. Economic Development; 2. Social Capital; 3. Community Competence; and 4. Information and Communication. Public libraries can enrich these interconnections by building a neighbourhood’s adaptive capabilities (Veil and Bishop 2012). Veil and Bishop (2014) qualitatively demonstrated that libraries have both opportunities and challenges when it comes to enhancing community resilience. However, they did not measure the effect of libraries on community resilience.

Economic Development involves the sustained, concerted actions of policy makers and communities that promote the standard of living and economic health of a specific locality or neighbourhood and is a critical aspect of the community (Schumpeter and Backhaus 2003). One aspect of economic development concerns the fairness of risk and the vulnerability to hazards that a community assumes. This follows the “it costs more to be poor” model that argues that people in poorer communities assume more risk because there are fewer infrastructures, organizational networks, and social supports. Another important aspect of economic development has to do with the level and diversity of economic resources. Economic growth, stability of livelihoods, equitable distribution of incomes and assets, land and raw materials, physical capital, accessible housing, health services, schools, and employment opportunities are all significant economic resources for communities. Norris et al. (2008) explain the importance of equity of resource distribution as a component of economic development. Resource distribution studies look at the equity of income and other resources and how they are divided amongst members of the community. Often these divides are considered along racial or gender lines.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) brings another important consideration to the concept of resiliency: capital. He distinguishes three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. He defines “social capital” as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (198). In other words, social capital involves an individual’s ability to gain returns by investing, accessing, and using resources embedded in social networks. Received (enacted) and perceived (expected) social support are important aspects of social capital. This links to Norris et al. (2008), in that sources of assistance can determine if and how that help is available. For instance, it can determine from whom the help is coming (or from where it is expected to come) and what type of assistance comes from that source (e.g., emotional, informational, or tangible support). “Formal ties” to the community
include citizen participation and leadership as manifested through voter participation, membership in religious congregations, school and resident associations, neighbourhood watches, and self-help groups. In other words, formal community ties determine who is participating, why, and how. “Informal ties” to community include notions of social embeddedness that determine the strength of one’s social network. Another way of looking at community ties is through organizational linkages and cooperation, which determine which organizations work together and whether there are agreements in place to collaborate in the future. A “sense of community” is defined as an attitude of bonding, trust, and belonging associated with concern for community issues, respect for and service to others, and a sense of connection to others. “Attachment to place” refers to one’s connection to the neighbourhood or city apart from connections with other people.

“Community competence” was defined by L. S. Cottrell (1976) as a community that is “able to collaborate effectively in identifying the problems and needs of a community; can achieve a working consensus on goals and priorities; can agree on way and means to implement the agreed upon goals; and can collaborate effectively in the required actions” (197). Norris et al. (2008) consider community competence to be the networked equivalent of human agency marked by collective action and decision-making within the community. “Community action” is the community’s ability to act in a way that will help it recover from negative physical or social events, and includes coping strategies and shared plans for the future. Not only must a community be able to identify its problems, it must be able to work towards solving them. Critical problem-solving skills are vital in identifying problems and needs as well as in helping the community come to a consensus regarding goals and priorities. Flexibility and creativity determine a neighbourhood’s ability to adapt and change goals and objectives in light of new information and learning. Collective efficacy and empowerment determine trust and the shared willingness to work for the common good of a neighbourhood and one’s belief that one can and should participate. Finally, political partnerships are the type of political approach to civic involvement; they can be either proactive or reactive in nature.

Another determining capacity in community resilience described by Norris et al. (2008) is the “effective use of information and communication,” which they define as the creation of common meanings and understandings and the provision of opportunities to articulate needs, views, and attitudes. Defining characteristics of this capacity include responsible media, narratives, skills, infrastructure, and trusted sources of information. A responsible media outlet is one that portrays the disaster ethically and truthfully, including the types of
information they provide and how they provide it (this, in contrast to irresponsible media that focuses on exaggerated and extreme instances of looting and lawlessness with the hopes of gaining ratings). Community information and communication skills include educational levels of the citizens, their abilities to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) as well as the infrastructure of response systems, meaning the presence of computers, wires, Internet, power, Wi-Fi, etc. The narratives of this study demonstrate experiences of shared meaning and purpose and help members of the community create a collective understanding of reality. Trusted sources of information refers to whether the sender is trustworthy; often local sources are more trusted than major media outlets. Trusted information is critical during crises because there is often little time to confirm or validate information.

Narrative and Analysis

Qualitative methods began with ethnography as a way to study “the other” (Patton 2002). “Others” in the United States, according to Michael Patton, have been traditionally identified as “blacks, American Indians, recent immigrants, working-class families and the inner-city poor” (2002, 84). Critiques of classic ethnography “raise questions about imbalances of power, wealth, and privilege between ethnographers and those they would study” and “have raised fundamental questions about how the values and cultural background of the observer affect” observations (ibid.). Such critiques of this classic qualitative method have led to the development of autoethnography, or studying one’s own culture and oneself as part of that culture (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Laurel Richardson (2000) explains that autoethnographies should be evaluated according to five elements: 1. Substantive contribution; 2. Aesthetic Merit; 3. Reflexivity; 4. Impact; and 5. Expression of a Reality. The method of producing an autoethnography involves the researcher retroactively and selectively writing about past experiences and it may also use different texts, photographs, or other tools to help support the reflection.

For the remainder of this section, I will describe my experiences in the library at Holy Cross School leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina. I will also share narratives illustrating the adaptive capacities of community resiliency.

After teaching in the New Orleans Public School system for several years, I earned a Master of Library and Information Science from Louisiana State University and was subsequently hired as the head librarian at a 125 year-old boys’ school nestled on the banks of the Mississippi River. Life presented
amazing opportunities; what could possibly go wrong? I had no way of knowing, when I walked out of my library on Friday afternoon, that it would be more than two months before I would see it again. By the time I awakened on Saturday morning, a call to evacuate all of South Louisiana had been issued. I quickly tried to think about my most important possessions, grabbed my dog, packed up, and left. I headed to Baton Rouge thinking I would have to work on Monday morning and so I did not want to travel too far.

On Monday morning, New Orleans was hit by Hurricane Katrina and our levees failed. For the next couple of days, I watched the news in disbelief and saw pictures of my friends, co-workers, and neighbours fight to get out of New Orleans. I had always gone to school, worked, or both, so I never imagined I would be without a place to live or without a job. For the next two months I found myself homeless, jobless, and displaced; I did not know when the city would reopen. It is hard to imagine oneself standing in Red Cross lines for necessities or getting food from the Salvation Army, but that was my reality. During that time, even though I had gotten job offers from other library systems, I turned them down. I knew I would rather struggle at home than be anywhere else. For me, there was no doubt that when New Orleans reopened, I would be there. And the morning that residents were allowed to return, I was in that number.

Nothing could have prepared me for what remained of my city. There were boats on houses and houses on boats. Cars were in trees, trees were on cars, and debris was everywhere. No matter where you drove, you could see the dark, oily line demarcating the point where the water had risen. Oh, and there was a smell. The smell of death and decay permeated everywhere; it became such a part of my daily life that I do not even remember when it finally went
away. There were moments when I was not really sure if I would survive. Would it not be easier to just go somewhere else and start over? I doubted whether I had the strength to rebuild my home, my city, my life, piece by piece. But I resolved to do one thing: save something, anything.

When I headed to the Lower Ninth Ward, the first thing I saw was the breach in the Intracoastal Canal and a barge sitting in the middle of what had been a street of colourful houses. As I turned off the bridge, the National Guard stopped me. The Lower Ninth Ward was still closed to residents and was not safe; we were under “look and leave orders.” Look and leave orders allow residents in a specific area to look at their properties and assess damage but they were required to leave each day by 6:00 p.m. As I drove up to the campus, I could see the magnificent oak trees that have watched over Holy Cross for over a hundred years. The devastation took my breath away. The gym was completely demolished and there was a water line above the windows on the first floors of the buildings on campus. All of the cafeteria tables were covered with mud and sludge and were strewn in every direction. Offices and classrooms were filled with dirt, garbage, dead animals, and fish. Lockers were rusty and mouldy and the disgusting black line went half way up the second flight of stairs. When I saw the library, my heart skipped a beat. Broken windows, roof tiles, and debris were everywhere. I knew it was going to be a long time before the library would be ready for students again.

The Holy Cross Neighbourhood, 2005
Holy Cross first floor hallway, 2005

An office in Holy Cross, 2005
Only two weeks after Hurricane Katrina, Holy Cross opened a temporary school in Baton Rouge using a school building from 4:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. after the regular students finished classes. More than eighty-five percent of our students and faculty lost everything. But we were determined to bring back Holy Cross. Our students (and some faculty) took an hour-and-a-half bus ride each way, just to be a part of our community. Unfortunately, since we had no library building, they could not hire me as the librarian. By January 2006, Holy Cross received trailers from FEMA and began operating out of its Lower Ninth Ward campus. I talked to my principal and pleaded for a job so I could still work at Holy Cross. Like everyone else, I knew I had to be part of the rebuilding. He finally hired me as his secretary, and I knew this was the first step in rebuilding the library.

As summer approached, business was coming back to the Big Easy. I am especially proud to say the American Library Association (ALA) was the first National convention to be held in New Orleans after the storm. I can never express how grateful I was to the ALA and its members for having faith that New Orleans would rebound. I asked for volunteers and they came and helped me clear out all of the mouldy and mildewed books and pack the ones I believed we could save. If you have never been to New Orleans in the late June, let me tell you it is hot. Sweltering. So to ask people to work for hours on a second floor without power and air conditioning, in an environmentally unsafe building, is to ask a great deal. But no one complained. Even publishers who brought books to the convention donated the leftover volumes to libraries in our city. These books, combined with those I purchased myself, would be the first additions to our new library collection. At the end of summer, a position opened to teach ninth grade English and American College Testing (ACT) preparation. I was grateful to get this job, because I was a terrible secretary.

Our entire school was operating out of trailers in our old parking lot. The only trailer left for my class was being used as a combined IT site, admissions office, guidance department, and computer lab. Because there was no physical space for our school library, I created a “cybrary.” I contacted online book companies, begged for free subscriptions, and organized websites that would entertain the students and help teachers with the curriculum—without taking up any physical space. I began to go back into the buildings to look for supplies and books during my planning periods. Sometimes I was able to borrow a few students from physical education classes and have them carry whatever I could salvage back to my trailer. Eventually we had four bookcases, two spinning shelves, and almost 200 books—not nearly enough. With so many decisions weighing heavily on the adults of New Orleans, the children were often forgotten or considered last. Students no longer had toys, video games,
sports equipment, or games: they needed distractions and the few books we had were not “cutting it.”

During graduate school, I had written a successful grant to fund a library in a youth detention centre and I thought I should try grant writing again. So during the days, I taught English, pillaged books, and looked for funding sources online. At night I wrote grant proposals. The first grant I submitted was to the Laura Bush Foundation requesting almost $30,000 to purchase new books. In April 2007, I found out that I had made it to the final round and that I would be interviewed by Jose Aponte, the director of San Diego County Libraries. When Jose came to campus, I showed him my trailer and then took him to see our old library. Although I believed we had saved some books, Jose pointed out that the volumes were beginning to grow mould; the entire collection was a complete loss. A few days later, I found out that I had not only received the grant, but I was awarded $50,000 and Laura Bush was coming to meet me and see all six of my library shelves for herself. The next ten days were a whirlwind for me, filled with arrangements with the staff of the Office of the First Lady and the Secret Service, as well as televised interviews. It was a humbling moment when I learned that a motorcade with First Lady Laura Bush, Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, and then Lt. Governor and now Mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, was touring the devastated Ninth Ward, and that this distinguished group was on their way to see me and what I managed to accomplish in my library.

Earlier that year during a meeting, I had struck a deal with my headmaster: if I raised $40,000 he would buy me my own trailer for a library. When I received the grant, he delivered. In August 2007, two years after the storm, I opened our first, true temporary library. I was fortunate to continue to
receive grants from the Louisiana Library Association, the First Book Organization, We the People Bookshelf, the Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and another from the Laura Bush Foundation. In all, I was able to raise nearly half a million dollars to pay for books, furniture, equipment, software, shelving and supplies. From 2007–2009, I opened three temporary libraries and designed a permanent 6,000 sq. ft. (557 m²) library, which opened in March 2010.

First Lady Laura Bush visits Holy Cross to announce grants for Gulf Coast school libraries (photo credit: Charles Illanne)

**Economic Development**

Communities assume different amounts of risk and can be more vulnerable depending on the quality of their infrastructure. Being situated in the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the most economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in
New Orleans, certainly played a factor in our ability to rebuild. In stark contrast to the neighbourhood where we were located, our school community and its infrastructure were very strong. Though our buildings were old (some of them warranting historical preservation status), they were well maintained. Our ability to secure funding from FEMA for temporary trailers in our parking lot allowed our school to get up and running before many other schools in the city.

My definition of community for this article is extremely narrow: the Holy Cross School community—so it is difficult to measure the level and diversity of existing economic resources. I believe the area where Holy Cross had the most impact was in the financial support of its faculty and staff after Hurricane Katrina, whether we were able to return to work or not. The New Orleans Public School Board fired all of its employees, who received their final paycheque on September 1, 2005. Holy Cross handled the situation much differently. They offered jobs to everyone they could at their temporary location in Baton Rouge two weeks after the storm and gave everyone else fifty percent of their salary until they found other employment. Stabilizing our livelihoods by providing a secure source of income for all Holy Cross employees was a decision that allowed me, and so many others in our community, to return to New Orleans and rebuild.

Social Capital
The social networks that emerged after Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the resiliency of communities and people like nothing I have ever experienced before. Much as Rebecca Solnit (2009) describes in A Paradise Built in Hell, people in our community found strength in each other as well as the social supports needed to face the challenges in front of us. Jay Walljasper (Dudley 2012) describes our experience well, leading me to believe that what we endured was not unique: “libraries stand as a prime example of social capital, which more and more observers see as the secret sauce that makes the difference between a community that thrives and one that struggles” (1). Holy Cross School was a well-recognized pillar of the New Orleans community. I believe our history in the city and our high number of legacy students created a network of associations that increased our school’s resiliency capabilities; it seemed that there was hardly a business or organization in New Orleans that did not include at least one Holy Cross alumnus. As a school, we relied heavily on our social network for support and whether we needed lawyers, engineers, architects, or chefs our alumni organization was there to help. This network, which was already in place before the hurricane, was key to our community resilience.
The sense of community at Holy Cross was unique. Our community was special and the attitude of our students frequently demonstrated this fact. Once, while working with Juniors on college test preparation, I asked the students to respond to a writing prompt about whether the school should require them to wear uniforms. I expected students to rant and rail about their uniforms, as I had done when I was young. Instead, I was completely overwhelmed by the almost unanimous response; students were proud to wear uniforms. They said they loved to be out in the city wearing their school uniforms so people knew that they were “Holy Cross men” just by seeing them.

It has been ten years since the hurricane. One thing that stands out in my mind is the sacrifices students made to attend or graduate from Holy Cross. During the time when we were in temporary quarters in Baton Rouge, our students travelled in the late afternoon to attend classes after working all day clearing their homes. They often would not return home until after midnight, only to do it all again the next day. I remember early in the morning, after we had returned to the trailers in the Lower Ninth, the football players would come in before school to practice. They had to pull all of the workout equipment out of a shed, set it up, work out, and then put it all back before class started. I remember being in awe of the dedication of those students. For me, the most remarkable were the pupils who chose to stay with friends or other family just so they could continue to go to our school. One student’s parents relocated to Texas after Hurricane Katrina. He stayed in a trailer with his aunt and took two buses every morning and afternoon to make sure that his diploma came from Holy Cross.

Though we were very attached to the Lower Ninth Ward campus, in the end we had to relocate to a new neighbourhood in New Orleans. We transported icons—statues, the gazebo, the bell—from our old campus to the new one, and saw our traditions flourish on our new campus. It helped me realize that while a sense of community is attached to place, the people are the glue that holds a community together, regardless of the infrastructure. As we watched our connections grow on our new campus in Gentilly, I realized how proud I was of the library’s role in building a community in our new space; it became “the place to be” on campus. While there was no faculty lounge and few places to hang out during lunch, our library became the space on campus for both students and faculty to come together as a community.
Community Competence

The Holy Cross community demonstrated a level of competence that I have rarely seen in an organization. Much of this competence, I believe, was founded in strong leadership and clear goals. Our community action priorities were clear from the beginning. Only for a moment was there a question about whether we would reopen; following that decision, every move was made to reestablish our school in the “new” New Orleans. Our ability to consider the problems that we were facing, find temporary locations to hold classes while we constructed new buildings, and come up with flexible and creative solutions was key. In addition to our own organizational efficiency, our Board of Directors worked diligently through political partnerships to ensure that our concerns were heard and understood.

Information and Communication

We know that libraries are more than the resources they hold. People who survive disasters often mention that they not only appreciated the information they received at the library, but also the space it provided to gather with other members of the community and commiserate, mourn, and gain a shared experience of the crisis (Celedón et al. 2012). Narratives are one way that communities come together to create shared experiences; they also help us avoid repeating past mistakes. “Failure to remember, collectively, triumphs and accomplishments diminishes us. But failure to remember, collectively, injustice and cruelty is an ethical breach. It implies no responsibility and no commitment to prevent inhumanity in the future” (Minow 2002, 28). Since we were operating out of trailers for several years, space was at a premium and the library served as a meeting space for our community. Our faculty meetings were held there. It also functioned as a faculty lounge, computer lab, and library for our entire community. This temporary facility provided the physical space that would allow citizens of our neighbourhood to be near one another and to share experiences.

The media’s responsibility to ethical journalism is critical during times of disaster. Often the media can perpetuate myths or rumours about unrest that can exacerbate the crisis, with media replaying frightening images simply for effect. Replaying the same images over and over and focusing disproportionately on communities of color or in poverty has been touted as “exploitative” and “voyeuristic” and some have even gone so far as to refer to it as “disaster porn” (Sirotta 2010). One striking example of this was when CNN News anchor, Wolf Blitzer, commented, “you simply get chills every time you
see these poor individuals … so many of these people … so poor and are so black” (Blitzer 2005). This focus on devastation, race, and socioeconomic issues is very little help to those on the ground. To the contrary, those of us on the ground observed people sharing information that helped others make decisions. For example, though the offices and printing presses of the Times Picayune were flooded, the local New Orleans newspaper was able to continue to inform its community through its blog on www.nola.com.

What difference can a school library make? It might be reasonable to imagine that we had little influence over the infrastructure in our neighbourhood, but there were many instances where our presence had a positive effect on our larger community. For example, we pressured the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board as well as Entergy to prioritize rebuilding infrastructure in our community. Most of the telephone poles in our neighbourhood were damaged, so there was no phone service. We were able to use switchboards at Holy Cross as routers for new telephone lines and to bring Internet service back to the area. As a school community, we embraced technology and used this crisis as an opportunity to become a “1:1 laptop school,” where every student received a school-issued portable computer. Resiliency is the ability to establish a “new normal.” We created a new normal by rebuilding infrastructure and incorporating new technologies, which moved us ahead.

Discussion
The community resilience framework calls for governments to identify the capacities they possess that will make it possible for them to bounce back after a tragedy. Identifying and strengthening these capacities can help communities recover more quickly. As a school librarian, this experience helped me to consider the roles and services of libraries on a grander scale. Through this process of reflection, a major theme emerged that serves as a lesson about how librarians and information professionals can position themselves within communities to help support their adaptive capacities.

It is critical that library and information professionals embed themselves within their communities and build trust before events occur so they are already seen as a resource when disaster strikes. This is true not only for school libraries, but for all libraries. Libraries are physically and socially embedded in neighbourhoods, and are therefore well positioned in terms of infrastructure and expertise to fulfill the information and communication needs of the various actors within those communities. I believe my position on the school leadership
team along with my appointment to the building committee allowed me to advocate for the resources the library needed to serve the community. These appointments also allowed me to remind the leaders of the school how the library could support our community. Therefore, it is my firm conviction that librarians must situate themselves in positions of power at their institutions so they can make the case for library services in critical times. Again, this idea is not only relevant at the school building level but at the public library level as well. Public libraries, now considered essential community organizations by FEMA, should work with their local governments to create standard operating procedures that include plans to support their neighbourhoods during disasters. Governments at all levels should include procedures for the design and delivery of emergency planning and response efforts.

![The new Holy Cross Library](image)

**Conclusion**

The Holy Cross School is not a large community, but the experience described here demonstrates the pivotal role that a library can play during a time of intense crisis. More research is needed to identify ways that libraries contribute to the adaptive capacities of communities, and to discover how libraries can be better positioned to meet the critical needs of their communities when they are needed the most. In hindsight, it was important for me to lose so much, because it helped me understand what is absolutely essential: my family, my friends, my community. Being a part of the rebuilding process after Hurricane Katrina taught me that my school was not just a building and that my city was not just
infrastructure. Both are made up of people dedicated to working towards similar goals. Our library was a cornerstone of community resiliency.

The new Holy Cross Library
References


