

New documentary explores long term disaster recovery in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

Written by



Film narrated by actress Khandi Alexander

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was felt around the nation. Images of a flooded New Orleans and decimated coastal communities overwhelmed our televisions and newspapers, and they still often appear. The death and destruction became the focal point of natural tragedy, and are still what most remember. A new documentary aims to change that.

“Coming Home: Hurricane Katrina 5 Years Later,” directed by David Barnhart, focuses on one of Katrina’s more intriguing human phenomena. Five years after the storm, many residents and New Orleans natives are still trying to make it back home. For many, this was made possible not by government grants or the natural retreat of the waters, but by volunteers. “Coming Home,” narrated by actress Khandi Alexander of HBO’s *Treme*, delves into the relationships that have formed between these volunteers and the grateful residents they’ve helped.

Plagued by insurance policy fine print, scam artists and the sheer lack of man power, many Gulf Coast residents were not able to get their homes in habitable shape after the storm hit. Roofs fell apart, walls rotted and hastily-made repairs didn’t meet inspection requirements. “Coming Home” sheds light on stories the news media has not covered for several years – and the long term consequences of one of the most destructive natural disaster in U.S. history.

The documentary was funded by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA), the long term relief arm of the Presbyterian Church USA. The long term nature of the Hurricane Katrina recovery effort is the central point of the film, as well as of the work of PDA.

The film will be broadcast on Minneapolis’s NBC affiliate KARE TV11 on Sunday, September 5 in commemoration of the five-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Check your local listing for time.

As one of the most destructive natural disasters in U.S. history, the impact of Hurricane Katrina is still being felt even five years later. Total estimated property damage from the storm topped \$81 billion, with \$105 billion of federal dollars spent so far on the recovery. Katrina claimed 1,836 lives, and left approximately one million people displaced from their homes.

Today, thousands remain “homeless,” with many still hoping to return from nearby cities like

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Houston and Dallas. Of those who've made it finally, the film aims to show not only their struggle to do so, but the people who help them overcome the inherent challenges. The film features a woman about to give up on rebuilding her home after being scammed by a local contractor, but who serendipitously meets a volunteer who lends his own toolset to the project.

But the documentary also shows the impact of the recovery effort on volunteers, in many cases people from elsewhere who joined a church, mission or community service group, only to have their lives permanently changed by the experience.

"We wanted to show a bigger story – a story about relationships formed out of unimaginable disaster, where in fact out of something awful emerges something good," Barnhart says.

Barnhart's signature process -- allowing the film's subjects to be actively engaged in the filming process – was employed with this film. Barnhart interviewed his subjects on camera and allowed them to watch that footage later, asking them to further comment on their own reaction. He also talked with them off camera at length to gain deeper perspective and allow them to build confidence and understanding about the documentary.