

Lady Katrina

*By Sheila A. Johnson*

Today we live in a nation whose vast and colorful landscape has been defined by a myriad of races, religions, sexual orientation, cultures, communities, institutions, and systems. In 1787 fifty-six men consciously and intentionally drafted a constitution designed to bind together the common beliefs and core values of a people living in a land separated by boundaries of longitude and latitude. Soon thereafter, these individuals collectively became identified as citizens of an international icon known as the United States of America. It is in this place of freedom, liberty, pursuit of happiness, and personal refuge that I have been witness to some of life's steepest successes and deepest tragedies.

In my six decades of life, I have learned to hold on to the treasures found in life's catastrophes and let go of the egoistic delusions of success. 'Holding on' and 'letting go' can create a rhythmic balance of existence when both are possible. But there are times and places when 'holding on' is not a choice and 'letting go' is the only choice.

August 30, 2005 found me along with several other volunteers trying to provide relief, comfort, food, shelter, and hope to a clan of people who had lost EVERYTHING materialistic and EVERYTHING living to the voracious appetite of Hurricane Katrina. No one could have imagined the horrific after-effects of Lady Katrina.

Horrified, women and men tried to literally hold on to their spouses and significant others as the rising waters of Katrina snatched their loved-ones away, but they had to let go. Screaming new mothers desperately tried to harbor their infants and children from suffocating torrents of water, family members fiercely clung to their terrified pets, and everyone tried to keep any available written form of their identity, but they had to let go. Businesses anxiously tried to claim their crumbling offices, jail houses were determined to bar their prisoners, public officials scrambled to preserve their dignity and professionalism, and FEMA and other federal agencies gasped as they tenaciously tried to honor their promises, but they ALL had to let go. Mental health workers, pastors, volunteers and I – each one – had to let go of our pride, our fear of living a life filled with uncertainties, our coveted "personal time and space," and in many cases we had to let go of our sanity. As volunteers and survivors alike worked on plans for long-term recovery, we had to let go of some of the visions and beliefs scripted in a constitution that underwrote liberty and justice for all of the citizens of this United States of America.

As we approach the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina's landing on US soil, I reflect on the treasured lessons learned and the friendships earned from a catastrophe that was waiting to happen. I have learned to appreciate the least of my gains and the greatest of my losses. I have a new perspective on caches such as "live life to its fullest," "life is not promised," "sink or swim," and "many are called but few are chosen." I believe that the line between "holding on" and "letting go" is a tightrope between life and death.

