

"A Creative Leap for New Orleans"

January 2008

Anna Katherine Montgomery

When Hurricane Katrina slammed through the city of New Orleans during the summer of 2005, it shattered the very bones of this famously vibrant city and wrought unspeakable havoc on its amazingly loyal population. As a city whose echoes of homegrown jazz, blues, zydeco and a host of other native sounds were before the oft heard song of this sprawling town by the Mississippi River, now the need for help was a cry so loud and deep it seemed to reverberate around the world.

Millions watched in horror as film crews depicted the city drowning in waves of displaced river, ocean and flood waters which had catapulted over the broken levees into the very heart of the city and beyond, carrying the rubble of destroyed buildings and homes, killing over a thousand people and displacing over a million. Imagine facing the consequences of the costliest natural disaster in American history (\$81.2 billion/Wikipedia). How would this city, its people, and their culture be recovered, and who could help reverse the effects of a disaster of this magnitude? The American Red Cross led the way in answering the call, and when their own extraordinary efforts needed support, they reached out to George Washington University's (GWU) Institute of Crisis, Disaster, and Risk Management and to Creative Leaps International to give them the tools of resiliency they needed to face this crisis.

In the aftermath of this catastrophe, another crisis loomed. With accusations flying and people huddled in mass camps like survivors of an all out war, there was great controversy over the government's ability to apprehend the situation in a swift and sure manner. Care poured in from multiple avenues as the National Guard, Special Response Teams, and scores of volunteers from universities, churches and special care teams arrived to sift through the horror. Yet, the city was broken on every level, and is still recovering today. While the exiles of a city that was 80% underwater are slowly returning, its heart is still battered, and the culture is in danger of extinction, a culture that is truly one of a kind as an indigenous spirit of joy, fusion, and hope.

Heroes have been needed.

As a legendary source of relief, the American Red Cross demonstrated genuine heroism in its efforts to stabilize New Orleans. The efforts were enormous, the needs and wounds gaping far beyond even the worst of disasters. As caregivers pushed themselves to extraordinary levels of performance in saving lives and communities, the strain on the Red Cross staff itself became dangerously high. There was an increasing realization that while deploying their hearts and souls caring for others, the caregivers themselves were facing burnout. As the official report from the Southeast Louisiana Red Cross states, "not only individuals, but organizations responding to this catastrophic event became its victims." Even the heroes were in trouble now; more help was needed.

CEO John Cimino of Creative Leaps International helped to design a Resilience and Renewal Retreat as the culminating component of GWU's yearlong Southeast Louisiana Resilience Project. The retreat's revolutionary design, steeped in the performing arts and cross-disciplinary approaches to learning and personal growth, would establish an impressive benchmark for this healing work in the months to come.

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What does it mean to be a resilient organization?

The final draft report on the Resilience Project for SELA prepared by the George Washington University Institute for Crisis, Disaster, and Risk Management quoted the organizational cultural elements that characterize resiliency from MIT expert Yossi Sheffi's book *The Resilient Enterprise*:

- Continuous communications that provide staff with both a general state of the organization and with real-time situation reports, so actions can be taken quickly and are appropriate to the immediate context
- In time constrained situations, there is deference to expertise, whether or not that expertise comes with a title, and strong teamwork, helping to identify the right response without a delay.
- These organizations are conditioned to be innovative and flexible in the face of low-probability/high impact disruptions through frequent and continuous small challenges.

The Red Cross is expected at all times to be no less than a super-resilient organization. The SELA chapter already had in place a large number of the attributes needed to be resilient. However, Hurricane Katrina presented astronomical demands that were relentless in scope and longevity, creating a highly abnormal level of strain on the chapter's functioning abilities.

Several task forces were implemented by George Washington University's Crisis team to help identify what problems were now festering among the staff, including these issues:

- Dealing with emotional, physical and material fragility and/or scarcity
- Organizational divisions hindering internal relationships
- Lack of validation of worth reflected monetarily, in job satisfaction, and in appreciation
- Lack of effective communication and relationship-building among staff and management

The list of issues was overwhelming for most even to begin discussing them. Experts realized that before the organization itself could begin to heal as a whole, individuals needed extensive recovery. As the George Washington University report states, "When stressed, and especially when traumatized, it is often quite difficult to coherently state what is happening in one's inner and outer world."

Creativity as the breakthrough agent for recovery.

"A Creative Leap for New Orleans"

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One of the first processes employed in individual recovery for the SELA chapter was "The Sandtray Process", introduced at a March 2007 mental health workshop focusing on trauma containment. This method of creative symbolic play allowed participants to use small sandtrays and miniature objects to create depictions of scenarios and feelings that were too difficult for individuals to discuss aloud.

As thoughts began to be heard among the staff, it became readily apparent that there was extreme difficulty in the relationships between staff and management on every level, beginning with deep anger toward the National Headquarters' lack of effective and timely support of the chapter in the wake of the hurricane. Staff were used to receiving commands and directives from the National Headquarters, creating a dependent relational style. When help did not arrive in a moment of extreme need, the result among staff was passivity and a paralyzing reliance on non-functioning systems. The solution identified by the Resilience Project is to learn how to look inside themselves for innovation, creativity, and solutions.

It became apparent that within SELA, *listening* was needed at an extraordinary level in order for painful problems to be heard, documented, and discussed to reach solutions beneficial to all.

And so The Listening Project was established to help create the necessary open communication needed to heal the staff and management from the dysfunction of their working relationships. Additionally, emergency response had necessitated the creation of spontaneous job descriptions among staff left with little to no supervision in the throes of disaster mode. Listening to each person vent their frustrations and hopes for their positions and the organization as a whole was the first step to healing. The next step followed more easily: an agreement to respond to these tensions with immediate changes, and bringing the entire team together to focus on shared goals.

Exploring the multitude of painful experiences and dysfunctional relationships that had developed in dealing with this catastrophe was uncomfortable for all involved, to say the least. Even more daunting was the prospect of pushing through the quagmire to effect change. Something more was needed.

It was at this juncture and for this purpose that Creative Leaps International was brought on the scene. It was time to see what the arts could do to internalize the emerging learnings and catalyze the much needed actions.

The plan called for a two-day capstone Renewal and Resilience Retreat. CEO John Cimino of Creative Leaps worked closely with SELA staff members and George Washington University Research Scientist, Laura Olson, to gain a clear understanding of the needs at both the individual and organizational levels. The stakes, in human terms, were high. Lives and spirits were in need of healing and the Creative Leaps team was determined to succeed for them.

The retreat began with a customized Concert of Ideas focusing on the themes of courage, imaginative vision, compassion, community and leadership. Three decades of experience had taught the Creative Leaps team to how to warm and open hearts

"A Creative Leap for New Orleans"

January 2008

Anna Katherine Montgomery

and minds through sensitive, engaging, buoyant performances of their music. And not only music, but also theater, poetry and archetypal stories. The SELA staff found themselves genuinely and compassionately invited into a thoughtful, playful, interactive process. Then, while the experience was still fresh, the participants were afterwards given an opportunity to express their own thoughts and impressions in Facilitated Conversation Circles. The *inner work of art* had begun.

The next step involved giving the various Resiliency Project Task Forces an opportunity to re-present their goals and achievements thus far.

The Creative Leaps team embraced these revelations and followed them with a set of workshops designed to further inspire, guide and celebrate the best potential of each individual member and the collective efforts of the whole. The workshops were:

- **Leadership: Thinking, Perceiving and Judgment** – Led by John Cimino, President and CEO of Creative Leaps International, this workshop introduced leadership tools for working in complex, dynamic environments. Concepts included fluid perspective, exploration in the absence of rules, intelligent perception, facility with metaphor, and leadership as partnership.
- **Of Color and Courage** – Workshop leader Paul Spencer Adkins led participants into a “celebration of differences”, a gentle guide to realizing their best lives as leaders who embrace diversity. He did this through a glorious presentation of the journey of classical concert artist Roland Hayes.
- **Top Form: Risk, Focus, Flow** – Donna Wissinger and Jon Klibonoff focused on the essence of peak performance, sharing their personal stories as athletes and performers. Participants gained insights into of the personal and psychological skills utilized by high performance athletes and top performers.
- **The Kinesthetics of Leadership** – Dianne Legro, Creative Leaps’ master teacher and presentation coach, taught participants how to master their own ability to maintain their still point centeredness (physically, emotionally, mentally and kinesthetically) while operating under pressure and in high stakes moments.
- **The Hero’s Journey through the Bach Chaconne** – Richard Albagli brought participants deeper into the world of archetypes they had been studying. Aligning your life to its deepest passions and dreams was the theme of this remarkable workshop. By studying great works of music such as the featured Bach Chaconne, participants reviewed the stages of the Hero’s journey: answering the call to transform their lives and undertaking the life-changing mission through the power of an integrated vision.

After this first round of workshops, the SELA staff engaged in a ceremony to purge their collective pain through a fire pit ritual where they were given the opportunity to write down all the horrible experiences of Hurricane Katrina they wanted to get rid of, and throw them into a fire-pit. Following this ceremony, a fabulous Second Line

"A Creative Leap for New Orleans"

January 2008

Anna Katherine Montgomery

Brass Band comprised exclusively of talented teens appeared on the scene and opened the night to celebration and a BBQ.

The second day of the Retreat started with another opportunity for participants to take part in the Creative Leaps workshops. Afterwards, Red Cross Chapter leader, Kay Wilkins, opened a discussion of next steps for the Resilience Project and the Chapter as a whole. Energies were high and participants emerged asking for a third round opportunity to participate in the Creative Leaps workshops. The schedule was quickly amended and the Creative Leaps team cheerfully obliged.

To end the retreat, participants joined the Creative Leaps team in the design and performance of a celebratory Harvest of Learnings concert. The Harvest concert would bring to life the take home insights of the participants themselves. They would serve as authors, narrators, designers and, in many cases, also creative musicians and performers giving voice and form to their heart felt realizations and dreams for the future. With the final number, "The Impossible Dream", everyone rose to their feet, singing with gusto and victorious on their road to recovery.

The feedback from the Retreat experience proved overwhelmingly positive. As CEO John Cimino stated, "Their pain was no longer their only option. New possibilities appeared within reach and they had decided to reach for them. This is precisely what we at Creative Leaps strive for with every ounce of our energies."

The future holds more collaboration in store for Creative Leaps International and the city of New Orleans. New developments include plans to partner with the New Orleans Musicians' Clinic to offer the musicians of this city the opportunity to train as *teaching artists*. As teaching artists, the musicians would be able to work in the schools helping the next generation to realize their dreams while simultaneously giving a meaningful boost to their own livelihoods as "tradition bearers" for a great city.

The song of joy that has so long been the hallmark of New Orleans is expanding once again, to be heard, to be loved, and to be preserved for generations to come.

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"A Creative Leap for New Orleans"

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(Addendum One)

New Orleans Speaks: Reflections on Resilience and the Inspiration of Creative Leaps International

Laura Olson

George Washington University Research Scientist

Our experience working with Creative Leaps International was crucial to lifting people up and out of their day-to-day experience. Inspiring hope, engendering continued passion, and providing a respite are important parts of the resiliency process that Creative Leaps was able to provide. We would highly suggest working together with them in future efforts of this sort. Their impact was positive, difficult to generate through any other media, and indispensable.

Kay Wilkins

CEO of SELA

The members of our Chapter were touched by the gentle and reassuring presence of the Creative Leaps team, the obvious empathy and dedication to their journey, and the deeply meaningful nature of the Concert of Ideas, workshops, and Harvest of Ideas experiences that your team designed. The Performing Arts were able to access and open some part of all of our hearts and spirits that were greatly in need of relief and repair. I thank you and your team for your innovation and the vision of what possibilities lie in your artistry.

I watched how Adversity revealed our character day after day, and how we picked up the pieces and tried to put them back together. And I realized that one day no one would care what happened unless we cared. Adversity and disasters are going to happen...to someone else in a different form..and we want to pass on to that chapter the things we have learned.

Resilience to me is being able to take a traumatic situation, find what it is that is traumatic about it, and to address those issues in a way that is therapeutic, and to share that process to others who are going through the same thing. The next time something threatens you, you use that to help you. 'I've been through this before, I've got a roadmap and I'm gonna use it and help me to get through it again.'

You are sharing a new experience and building a framework for friendship by doing that.

Quotes from SELA Staff

(Creative Leaps International) heard the songs of our heart and were able to take those songs and show them to us. It kind of took your breath away for a moment. They were talking about anything you needed to do to get through any challenge life threw at you. I had tears in my eyes because you had a group of people who had a song in their heart

"A Creative Leap for New Orleans"

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who had forgotten how to sing and I knew this would bring them together. To me it was very amazing to watch us be transformed. Oh, what a great beauty it is when we fit (our ideas) together – we get strength from that, we get beauty from that. I got my dreams back.

The Performing Arts is such a great way to connect with things that maybe we can't articulate with words. And sometimes just being a participant in that arena can be a very healing thing.

Absolutely! I think it would have been wonderful for these talented and caring people to do something like this for employees and survivors of Katrina immediately after the disaster. I would definitely like to see this happen in a post-disaster context.

Creative Leaps gave us an opportunity to forgive our present situations and for a little while think about the fun things of life that we so often forget. It allowed us to live for the moment and we sometimes forget to do that. It allowed us to remember the real reason we are here on earth.

This was a wonderful experience and should be used as a model throughout the entire country.

(Addendum Two)

The Heart of an Artist: Creative Leaps Team Members on the New Orleans Experience

John Cimino, President and CEO

Our aim first and foremost was to bring joy into the room, to personalize that joy as an invitation to something irresistible and positive, something which enters your heart and imagination almost before you know what is happening and puts you at ease.

The concept of “intelligent perception” which accents the value of seeking multiple perspectives of what we might be tempted to believe is out there landed with a big “Ah ha” – lots of recognition of the value of this one. I felt honored to be witnessing their courage and heart-felt aspirations. What a pleasure and privilege for me.

I could not imagine a better partner than (George Washington University Research Scientist) Laura Olson in building a profoundly meaningful, profoundly complex 2-day event. Planning for this retreat meant envisioning pathways into people’s hearts and imaginations, healing pathways with lots of possible side roads for encounters with the

"A Creative Leap for New Orleans"

January 2008

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unknown and unexpected. Educating our intuitions was one of Laura's most important jobs and she accomplished it with intelligence, love and boundless energy.

Dianne Legro

John, you did an extraordinary amount of homework to tailor our presentation for the Red Cross. It was an all-around five star presentation.

We are performers with radical hope who use radical methods to become one with our audiences. When we create a 'happening' the way we do with the "Concert of Ideas," we are not exempt from its transformational powers. The heart they shared back with us engulfed us and brought us directly into their world full of talent, dedication, purpose, loss, hope and their own deeply sourced inner music. By the end the audience is on its feet joining in song sometimes with tears and melting hugs for each other as their own impulse to life flows back in their veins.

Donna Wissinger:

People who are continually reaching higher often realize that the most important factor in excellence in any organization is relationship. There is nothing else.

My task was one I undertook with humble determination. How can one speak of excellence and peak performance when the resources required to excel are not forthcoming and the *need* becomes greater every day? Yet, from the first moment I introduced myself and opened my heart to the Retreat participants, I felt the power of people determined to grasp every opportunity to revitalize themselves, their work and the inhabitants of their city.

Richard Albagli

What stood out for me in the workshop I ran was the fierce pride and sense of belonging that was so evident in the participants. New Orleans was their home and nothing – not government decrees nor natural disasters – could ever change that. "You made the music come alive for me," said one participant. But it was more than just music. It was their own story coming alive once more in their hearts, letting them know that setbacks and reversals are part of life but also allowing them to see that their resolve to continue is truly the stuff of heroism.

Paul Spencer Adkins

As each of my workshops grew in numbers, I began to have a better understanding of the American Red Cross employees' desire to be more open and understanding as individuals with unique diversities. Many of the participants expressed their heartfelt thanks for this experience. I wish to thank each one for giving of themselves. I feel honored to have worked with such Heroes. God bless them and their families.

"A Creative Leap for New Orleans"

January 2008

Anna Katherine Montgomery

Jon Klibonoff

I was honored that I could be a part of the Resilience Project for the Red Cross in New Orleans. As a performer, I felt that celebrating the rich musical contribution New Orleans has made upon the world was especially deserving of our attention. Through performing works of native composers Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong, a feeling of faith, continuity, and respect for the city's hallmark of music would help underscore what a truly special and warm human city New Orleans has been and will be even in the midst of horrific loss and destruction.