

# JSRI

JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

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## Upcoming Events

### With JSRI:

#### Dead Man Walking &

**Exonerated Exhibit.** Sr. Helen Prejean and the team behind the new graphic novel edition of her best-seller *Dead Man Walking* will discuss the book's creation. A book signing and reception featuring Becky Gottsegen's "[Exonerated: Portraits of the Wrongfully Convicted](#)" art installation will follow. **Tuesday November 11th, 6 P.M.** in Loyola College of Law at 526 Pine St. See the [flyer here](#) and read [more information here](#).

### On Campus:

**All Saints Day Walking History Tour & French Quarter Clean-Up.** Join LUCAP on All Saints Day for a walking reflection through the French Quarter that weaves together prayer, history, and acts of mercy. As we honor the saints—both named and unnamed, we'll remember those who shaped this city through faith, resilience, and quiet sacrifice. The walk includes a short history of All Saints Day, stops for reflection on the lives of New Orleans' holy figures, and a hands-on French Quarter

## Immigrant Workers' Critical Role in Rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina and Present Realities

By Dr. Sue Weishar

The destruction that Hurricane Katrina caused Gulf Coast communities has been well documented in JustSouth Monthly articles over the past nine months. [More than a million housing units were damaged or destroyed](#) and over 1.5 million people were displaced. [The New Orleans criminal justice system collapsed](#) and leaders exploited the disruption caused by the storm to [permanently close Charity Hospital](#), [fire nearly 4,000 Orleans Parish teachers](#), and [destroy undamaged public housing units](#). In addition, [125,000 small and midsize businesses in the region were disrupted](#) by the storm, over [200,000 people lost their jobs](#), and basic infrastructure like running water, electrical power, and sanitation services were upended and slow to recover.

In the weeks following the storm, tens of thousands of Latino immigrants found their way to a devastated New Orleans, drawn by the promise of high wages and the Bush Administration's emergency [federal decree that temporarily suspended immigration enforcement](#). Among the many changes wrought by Katrina, the in-migration of Latino workers to an area that had not attracted newcomers in any significant number for decades was seen by many as one of the few positive outcomes of that terrible storm.



November 8, 2005: View of the damage from the breach of the Industrial Canal to the Lower Ninth Ward after the water receded. Photo courtesy of George Long, from his book *Katrina Days: Life in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina*.<sup>1</sup>

clean-up as an offering of love for the city. This is a day to walk gently, serve humbly, and remember that sanctity often looks like mercy in motion. **Saturday November 1st from 10 A.M.–2 P.M.** Meet in the Palm Court at 9:45 A.M. Sign up [required](#). See the [flyer here](#) and read [more information here](#).

**The Legacy of Black Catholic Education.** Professor Katrina Sanders of the University of Iowa will give a talk at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 4, in the Audubon Room of the Danna Center titled “Valuing Black Catholic Schools: A Trinity of Collaboration.” Sanders has researched and written about Black Catholic schools in Louisiana, the value of Black Catholic education and Black Catholic activism. Her talk will focus on the “trinity” of players who made Black Catholic education possible. **Tuesday November 4th, 4:30 P.M. in the Audubon Room.** See the [flyer here](#).

**Art, Adaptation, Activism.** Sister Helen Prejean, the nation’s foremost death penalty opponent, joins Catherine Anyango Grünwald and Rose Vines, the illustrator and author of the new graphic edition of the award-winning memoir, *Dead Man Walking*, for a conversation about capital punishment, social justice, and the power of story. Free books will be given to all who attend the event. **Tuesday, November 13th 12:30–1:45 P.M. Bobet Hall 332.** See the [flyer here](#) and read [more here](#).

**“After Katrina”: Creating and Reclaiming Green Space.** Join the Environment Program for the second Roundtable of our 2025-2026 series. We will be joined by Jennifer Van Vrancken, Jefferson Parish Councilwoman At-Large, Division A, and Jason Neville, Executive Director of Lafitte

[A population-based survey](#) in March 2006 found that half of the reconstruction workforce was composed of Latinos and half of those workers were undocumented—with most coming from Texas or Florida. Over time, immigrant workers’ role in rebuilding the region became highly visible and widely lauded. **A [local journalist wrote recently](#) that, after Katrina, immigrants were “the workforce that saved New Orleans.”**

Migration scholars describe the reconstruction of post-Katrina New Orleans as having three overlapping phases:

1. Demolition and clean-up, from just after the storm to November 2005;
2. Demolition, clean-up, and reconstruction from November 2005 to March 2006;
3. After March 2006—reconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

In the initial period of demolition and clean-up, most workers were employed by large disaster recovery companies funded by the federal government to recover bodies, remove debris, demolish unsafe structures, and secure temporary roofs using blue tarps, which became ubiquitous throughout the region<sup>3</sup>. By [February, 2006, FEMA reported that 79,000 roofs](#) had been temporarily repaired in this way.



*Blue roofs in post-Katrina New Orleans. Photo by George Long.*

**Workers encountered high occupational risks as they were often not supplied masks or protective clothing and were exposed to unknown chemicals, with little federal oversight of work sites.** Many workers were housed in warehouses and in large ballrooms in damaged hotels, or crammed into the few apartments in New Orleans still in livable condition. Although promised high wages and food, this was often not the case<sup>4</sup>.

At recent prayer services to commemorate the work of immigrants in rebuilding New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast twenty years after Hurricane Katrina, undocumented immigrants reflected on their experiences in the early days of the post-Katrina recovery effort<sup>5</sup>:

*The type of work helping reconstruct New Orleans after Katrina was extremely hard... We would go into the houses and clean out everything that had been ruined and all the rotten stuff in refrigerators and also the animals that had been left behind. We covered our mouths and noses,*

Greenway Partnership, to talk about creating and reclaiming green spaces in New Orleans post-Katrina. **Tuesday November 13th 12:30–1:45 PM In Monroe 152.** See the [flyer here](#) and read [more information here](#).

**Hope & Harmony: Songs of Social Justice.** The music of social justice reflects an innate goodness in humankind seeking justice for all. The concert will reflect IVC's mission, the inspiration of music to make the world a better place, enhance awareness of IVC in the city, and provide financial support for the organization. The concert will feature local (some Grammy Award-winning) celebrity musicians and vocalists performing songs from various genres covering different social justice movements—from slavery abolition, women's suffrage, and civil rights, up to songs addressing issues of the present day. **Sunday November 16th at 3 P.M. in Nunemaker Auditorium.** See the [flyer here](#).

**Wolves on the Prowl: Delivering Blessing Bags with Compassion.** Join the Loyola community for Wolves on the Prowl, a day of service rooted in compassion and presence. This year, we'll walk through the French Quarter delivering blessing bags to our unhoused neighbors, offering not only essential supplies but human connection and dignity. This is more than a service project. It's a call to see, to listen, and to walk alongside those who are often overlooked. Every step is a reminder that justice begins with love made visible. **Saturday November 22nd from 10 A.M.–2 P.M. Meet at the Palm Court at 9:45 A.M.** Read [more information here](#).

**In the Community:**

*some had gloves, I luckily had a pair of boots that, thank God, someone had gifted me in Houston.*

*I lived with ten other people in a house that a friend had made available to us, and we were able to eat with the help of the Salvation Army... Wherever they saw a group of people working, they would stop and give us food. Sometimes we were only able to eat one or two meals a day. We all slept in that house without electricity or water. We only had a little bit of water to drink and brush our teeth and we would go searching for places that had some water to be able to bathe. (From testimony provided by Carmen R., originally from Guatemala, at the August 27 prayer service in New Orleans. Mrs. Carmen has lived in New Orleans since 2001.)*



*Carmen R. came to the United States from Guatemala. She is shown here cleaning out a flooded home in New Orleans in October, 2005. Photo provided by Mrs. Carmen.*

[Undocumented workers were especially at risk for exploitation](#), with 34 percent reporting in March 2006 they had received less money than expected, compared to 16 percent for documented workers. [A 2009 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#) found that a shocking **80 percent of Latino reconstruction workers had experienced wage theft since Katrina**.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the Bush administration [suspending the Davis-Bacon Act](#), which requires federal contractors to pay prevailing wages, child labor laws were often overlooked.

*After Hurricane Katrina, I worked cleaning debris and rebuilding the bridges of Ocean Springs and the San Luis Valley, doing other cement work such as sidewalks and parking lots. The work was hard; I was 16 years old and worked under the sun most of the time, withstanding a lot of heat and working 12 hours every day. I had no experience in that job. We slept enduring the heat and we ate from the pantries we had saved for emergencies during the hurricane. Donations of water and food arrived. Some employers paid me, but some employers failed to pay me. (From testimony provided by Cristobol, originally from El Salvador, at the August 28 prayer service held in Biloxi. Mr. Cristobol has lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for 21 years.)*

The later phases of reconstruction, beginning after November 2005, saw greater diversification of employers—more local contractors, more skilled work, more established day labor sites, and the rebuilding of residential structures.<sup>7</sup> At the August 27 New Orleans prayer service, homeowners professed their gratitude for the high-quality work immigrants did to rebuild their homes:

## Community Resilience

**Workshop.** Join Love Your Neighbor Nola & Nola Black Mental Health Matters in free mental health workshops for parents and caregivers. You'll learn ways to handle stress, how to build a support system, and strategies to support yourself and your family. **Saturday November 8th 11 AM–12 PM at 5630 Crowder Blvd Suite 101.** See the flyer [here](#).

## 'The Trail They Blazed' is currently on display at the Historic New Orleans

**Collection.** Leaders of the local Civil Rights Movement tell their stories of resistance in their own words. The exhibit features quotes from JSRI's Twomey Scholar, Dr. Ronnie Moore. The multimedia exhibition immerses visitors in the movement with ambient musical recordings of songs sung by activists, audio excerpts from oral history interviews, archival news footage, stirring photography, an interactive voter registration test, and more. The voices of those who experienced it firsthand narrate the tremendous and often dangerous effort to transform Louisiana from a Jim Crow holdout into an equitable place for all residents. **Admission is free. On view until June 7, 2026. Located on the 3rd floor of the Historic New Orleans Collection, 520 Royal Street.**

## Career Opportunities

**St. Charles Center for Faith + Action is hiring a Communications & Administrative Intern.** The St. Charles Center is seeking a college student interested in social justice, communications, and nonprofit leadership. This position offers hands on experience in social media, event support and admin work.

*My name is John Koefler, and I owned a house on Tulpeau Street in the Lower Ninth where my wife and I raised our family. The high winds of Katrina blew the shingles off the roof. Then the levee failed and high water came. The damage was severe. People here had few resources. Church groups sent volunteers that did what they could, and they did a lot. But it was the Latinos that filled in the balance, and work they did! They had skills and energy that made a tremendous difference in our recovery.... A crew from Brazil did the drywall in our house, very professional work, when no one else was available, at a price we could afford. Immigrants gutted homes, did carpentry and masonry, and much else to aid our recovery. The house across the street was brought back entirely from a shell by a Latino crew, from sill to roof peak. **Many Latino workers have endured much to come help us... We owe them a lot.***



September 20, 2005: Interior damage to a flooded home in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans. Photo by George Long.

It is important to understand that the 20th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina was observed against the backdrop of an unprecedented governmental assault by the Trump Administration on immigrants across the country, including the very same immigrants “who saved New Orleans” after the storm. The breadth and depth of this assault, which is [designed to produce fear and terror for undocumented immigrants and make their lives unbearable](#), is overwhelming and represents the most significant changes to immigration policy in our country's history.



Masked ICE agents. Photo by Paul Cafferery, Wikipedia Commons.

**Under Trump's second administration, ICE can racially profile anyone they suspect of being undocumented. anywhere, including churches, schools, and hospitals.**

People “following the rules” are arrested without mercy at their immigration

Send your resume to [center@stcharlesave.center](mailto:center@stcharlesave.center) by October 31st. See more about this [opportunity here](#).

**The Promise of Justice Initiative is hiring a Research & Interviewing Intern.** The Promise of Justice Initiative (PJI) is a New Orleans-based decarceration organization that stands at the forefront of the fight for the dignity, freedom, and autonomy of those targeted and touched by the criminal legal system and mass incarceration.

**Applications due February 25th, 2026.** Read more about this opportunity [here](#) through Loyola Handshake and [here](#) through the PJI website.

**PJI is also hiring a Design & Animation Intern.** Read more about this opportunity [here](#) on Handshake. **Applications due February 25th, 2026.**

court hearings. Migrants legally admitted to the U.S. in prior administrations have been stripped of their legal status and protections. The detention of immigrants has exploded while conditions in detention facilities have rapidly deteriorated, while government offices that were supposed to provide oversight to ICE and CBP have been all but eliminated.

The Refugee Resettlement Program has essentially been dismantled and asylum at the border has ended. Immigrants are being deported to some of the worst places on earth with no due process. As the [American Immigration Council](#) has rightly argued, **Trump's mass deportation agenda is an assault on our democracy and the constitutional order that structures our democracy, including fundamental rights we had assumed were guaranteed: freedom of speech, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, the right to due process, and birthright citizenship.**

The profound consequences of these cruel and inhumane policies on immigrant families were acknowledged at the August 27 prayer service. Prayers were offered for immigrant fathers of two families from St. Anthony of Padua Church and large photos of the fathers were displayed near the speaker's podium. Abner Gomez Velasquez and Ever Velasquez Fuentes (and two other St. Anthony of Padua parishioners) were [arrested by ICE in a worksite raid in Lafayette](#) on June 12th and detained, this despite the fact that both men had lived in the U.S. almost 20 years, have U.S. citizen children and no criminal issues, and were part of the immigrant workforce that rebuilt the city after Katrina.



Kevin Fitzgerald discusses how immigrant workers helped rebuild his family's home in Mid-City after Hurricane Katrina at a prayer service August 27 in front of St. Anthony of Padua Church. Photo by Brad Dude.

Because of the real and present danger of speaking in public, the testimonies provided by the immigrant speakers at the New Orleans and Biloxi prayer services were pre-recorded. Mr. Diaz, who moved to New Orleans from Houston soon after the storm to work in the recovery effort, described in his testimony what it is like to live in the U.S. during the Trump 2.0 regime:

*It's crazy. We don't feel free to walk outside or drive to a restaurant. We feel like we have a bunch of cartels looking for us, and when we go to open the door, we are really scared, like those people with masks are coming to your*

house to try and knock you down. (Testimony from Mr. Diaz, who is originally from Guatemala and has lived in the U.S. since 2002.)



Jasmine Bergeron Wright, whose predominately African American church was rebuilt largely by Latino immigrants, reminded those gathered at the New Orleans prayer service of a critical moral lesson from her community's past experiences with government terror and oppression:

*We have seen the immense harm to families and communities when loving parents were removed from their children during slavery and as a consequence of mass incarceration. If the madness of mass deportation is allowed to continue, the children will suffer. We will all suffer.*

*Jasmine Bergeron Wright speaking at August 27 Prayer Service for Katrina Immigrant Workers.  
Photo by Brad Dude.*

It is too easy to despair in these dark days, but I was given hope by participants at a recent Center for Migration Studies conference on how Catholics can mobilize to protect and defend immigrants. Here are comments from two conference speakers that provide a way forward.

Fordham University professor of theology and social ethics, [Fr. Brian Massingale](#), stressed that immigration to the U.S. has always been a racial issue, and that white people must speak out and take the fight to where the pain is. When white people remain silent, Fr. Massingale warned, "racism is allowed to fester." "Hope is a relay race grounded in community." The goal should be to run your best race for those that came before and those who will follow.

[Bishop Mark Seitz](#) of the Diocese of El Paso stated that now is the time to put it all on the line to show the liberating force of the Gospel and stand up for God's people and the values of God's reign. We must "be a church that is unambiguously pro-life, unambiguously on the side of the poor, of the immigrant, in the streets, visible and incarnate, that knows how to work together, is willing to take risks, and is at the front lines of building a more just and compassionate world."

Congress recently passed a bill that [increases ICE's budget by 300 percent, with the stated goal to deport one million immigrants a year](#). I pray that residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, who owe so much to the immigrants that rebuilt our communities after Katrina, speak out and stand up for our immigrant sisters and brothers. **Mass deportation is a Category 5 storm. It is all of our jobs to prevent it.**

<sup>1</sup>Long, G. (2007). [Katrina Days: Life in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina](#). Xibris Corporation. (All photos from George Long in this article are from this book and are used with his kind permission.)

<sup>2</sup> Donato, K.M., Trujillo-Pagán, N., Bankston III, C.L., & A. Singer (2007). Reconstructing New Orleans after Katrina: The emergence of an immigrant labor market. In D.L. Brunson, D. Overfelt, & J. S. Picou (Eds.), *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe* (pp. 217-234). Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The August 27, 2025, *Prayer Service to thank Katrina immigrant workers: Looking back in gratitude and moving forward in faith and solidarity* was organized by the Social Justice Committees of St. Anthony of Padua Church and Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and held in front of St. Anthony of Padua Church in New Orleans. A similar prayer service at Our Lady of Fatima Church in Biloxi, organized by El Pueblo Mississippi, was held at Our Lady of Fatima Church in Biloxi, Mississippi, on August 28.

<sup>6</sup> In late 2005, in response to wide-spread wage theft and other workplace violations of mostly low-wage immigrant workers, Professor Luz Molina led the founding of the Workplace Justice Project as a section of the Stuart H. Smith Law Clinic and Center for Social Justice at the Loyola College of Law.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

**Sue Weishar, Ph.D. served as a Policy and Research Fellow at the Jesuit Social Research Institute from August, 2010, to December, 2024. She currently chairs the Board of Directors for El Pueblo, serves as the volunteer coordinator for Cafe con Ingles at St. Anthony of Padua Church, and chairs St. Anthony's Social Justice Committee.**

*Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans. Please send feedback to [jsri@loyno.edu](mailto:jsri@loyno.edu).*

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