

# Our Guest Editor

*Talks about  
disasters  
and older adults*



JENNY CAMPBELL

Any profession devoted to human service has much to learn from a horrific event like Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, but for the field of aging this disaster is of particular concern because a large proportion of the victims—and, it turns out, many of the heroes—were older people. Now, with the dust of demolition still unsettled almost three years after that storm struck the Gulf Coast, this issue of *Generations* uses Katrina for a broad look at disasters and aging.

Jenny Campbell, our guest editor, presents disaster as a lens through which much about aging is revealed: vulnerabilities are more significant; infrastructure, service systems, and safety nets prove strong or weak; people show what they need and what they have to give. And we get a chance to consider how to respond more effectively in the future.

Campbell is in a good position to know. Since September of 2005, she has served as director of the Hurricane Fund for the Elderly, an initiative of the nonprofit organization Grantmakers in Aging to assist vulnerable older adults affected by the 2005 storms. With seed money from the Atlantic Philanthropies and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the idea was to focus philanthropic dollars on rebuilding senior services in the Gulf States. “This coordinated effort gave us a chance to work quickly and to structure the response,” Campbell says. The fund engaged other partners as well, raising nearly 3 million dollars, and is currently supporting more than twenty projects.

To take on the leadership task, Campbell, who holds a doctorate and master’s degrees in social

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work and education and gerontology, took a leave from her teaching duties at Bryn Mawr’s Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research and her business consulting for nonprofit organizations. Bringing service providers, older people, community groups, and funders together, Campbell drew on experience and skills honed over twenty-five years as an advocate for elders and an expert in longterm care.

Of the many months she spent in the disaster areas, Campbell says, “I was absolutely humbled to see how older people have gone through so much and still bounced back; how they rallied and volunteered and graciously accepted help. There was tremendous resilience, but also tremendous vulnerability and need. I am appalled by how our systems failed so many.

“Now, as I’ve traveled around the country talking about preparedness, I see that disaster planning has been a very abstract concept—a piece of paper in a notebook, a ‘read while you’re running’ document. If nothing else, the disaster in the Gulf States has brought this whole concept of preparedness into day-to-day relevance. It’s not a separate activity; it’s got to be in the fabric of what we do every day. And some good resources are coming out of this.

“We’re not helpless. It’s a human services and a government issue. We have the capacity in this country to do a wonderful job, but we must get better at tapping into that capacity. This issue is one more step in that direction.”

—Mary Johnson