

# The Rice Voelker Fund for Recovery

## August 15, 2015

“Everything I own is less than ten years old. Everything.” Those words were spoken by a Katrina survivor of my acquaintance recently and tens of thousands in South Louisiana could have truthfully said the same. For many Randy Newman’s lyric from his composition *Louisiana 1927* seemed prophetic: “They’re tryin’ to wash us away.”

The late philosopher-novelist, Walker Percy, saw a beneficent trait in hurricanes that is weaved into his best writing. Percy, who lived in Covington (also the home of our firm), theorized that a permanent malaise permeated humanity here and that indifferent acceptance of the status quo was jolted into vigilant cooperation with the approach of a hurricane.

Notwithstanding the shameful inaction of many members of officialdom during Katrina, Percy, who predeceased that storm by fifteen years, was largely accurate. But even Percy could not have foreseen the destruction or the restoration of property and spirit that ensued. That recovery is chock full of holes, and in many aspects incomplete, but no less remarkable in its scope. Greater New Orleans wears a pronounced economic bustle beneath its insouciant veneer.

The Spartan Boxing Club is a youth organization in the Lower Ninth Ward run by volunteers and serving at-risk youths in that neighborhood. The AAU sanctioned club was recently invited to an out-of-town competition but was without the financial means to go. The fund underwrote most of the cost of the trip for the team.

One of the club’s stars is best known by his nickname, King Tut. Tut is the number one ranked ten-year-old in the Southern District. Tut’s father was murdered and his mother died of a drug overdose. He lives in the care of his grandfather who is also a club coach. The Spartan Boxing Club mentors are giving Tut and his fellows critical lessons in self-discipline and civility at a formative point in their lives.



Spartan Boxing Club

Earlier this year I was introduced to Glenn Ford through members of the Innocence Project, who had recently gained his release from the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola). Glenn was wrongly convicted of murder and spent nearly thirty years in solitary confinement on death row. The overwhelming evidence of his innocence was ignored by an over-zealous prosecutor and a vengeful jury in a North Louisiana parish that leads the nation in per capita death sentences.

Despite voicing serious medical complaints late in his period of incarceration, he received minimal treatment. Shortly after his release, he was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer with no chance of recovery. Having spent nearly half of his sixty five years imprisoned and knowing his life expectancy was short, Glenn's one wish was for a vacation trip with his family. With the help of my brother, the recently retired Vice-Chairman of Royal Caribbean Cruises, the fund obtained a deeply discounted package with VIP treatment for a seven-day sailing from New Orleans to the Bahamas in early April for the Ford Family.



Glenn Ford

Glen's health declined so rapidly that his doctors ruled out any travel and he entered hospice care soon thereafter. Throughout the brief time of our friendship, Glen spoke without rancor about his experience and with sincere gratitude for his many caregivers. His story received coverage in the New York Times, Washington Post, and U.S.A. Today but little financial aid was forthcoming. At least the publicity produced a public apology from the prosecutor who acknowledged his own culpability in Glen's conviction. Glen Ford passed away in a state of penury on June 29 with no compensation from the State of Louisiana other than the twenty dollars he received upon his release. The fund provided for Glen's funeral and burial expenses.

Reflecting on the Katrina experience is an exercise of pain and solace. The memory of the faces of those displaced persons evacuated from the Superdome to our rural community gym is indelible. These were individuals and families without the means or opportunity to leave New Orleans before Katrina's arrival. I learned many first names during their stay and often wonder how they fared after they left.

Not surprisingly in this part of the U.S., the most uplifting event in the city's rebirth involved a football game. On Sept 25, 2006--barely a year past Katrina's arrival--the restored Superdome reopened for a Saints-Falcons game. A tangible and intensely emotional unity enveloped the slow-moving sellout crowd making its way toward the stadium. Total strangers held hands and hugged assuring each other in a common hope that better times were at hand.

Notwithstanding the strife that usually accompanies encounters with the Atlanta rivals, the game seemed almost anti-climactic until a loud thump was heard as the Falcons punted early in the first quarter. Reserve safety Steve Gleason rushed the kicker and blocked the kick with such authority that it ended up being recovered by the Saints for a touchdown. The Saints playing on karma smattered with sanctifying grace took home a win.

Gleason concluded his eight year Saints career in 2008 and contracted ALS in 2011. Through his *Gleason Initiative Foundation*, Steve has been an eloquent spokesman for understanding of the disease and fundraising for its cure, while heroically confronting his own challenge with the illness. The fund has continued its support of his effort. A sculpture recreating Gleason's block now stands at the entrance to the Superdome.



The Gleason Sculpture

Over the last four years, the fund has contributed \$16,000 as a scholarship for Marianne Gosciniak toward her pursuit of a degree at M.I.T. The Gosciniak Family's home and belongings were totally lost in Katrina. Marianne capitalized on her prodigious math skills in spite of medical difficulties that would have stymied a less determined individual. Marianne is now a graduate of M.I.T. and a software engineer with Yelp, Inc. in San Francisco.



Marianne Gosciniak

Walker Percy knew this place well. In 1985 he wrote words that would have been appropriate even today:

*The state is beautiful, unique, and there are no better people anywhere. If the United States takes pride in being a melting pot, in the sense that many ethnic types tolerate each other, that is, generally don't kill each other as they do in Lebanon, here in Louisiana as amazing mix of people not only tolerate each other but by and large get along well and have a good time.*

But his sensitivity to our shortcoming was equally prescient:

*We either continue our present course and become a somewhat comic, albeit slightly sleazy playground for tourists and conventioners — as indeed Louisiana is already perceived by much of the country. Or we can realize our unique potential, keep the good times, but conserve our natural wealth and that greatest wealth of all — our young people. There's the hope.*

Were he still with us, I am confident Percy would marvel at post-Katrina Louisiana but also likely give a grade of “incomplete” to our journey thus far. Wherever we are on that continuum, we are closer to a happy conclusion thanks to your generosity. And for that as always, a heartfelt thanks.

From inception to now, the fund has received a total of \$1,161,258.66 in donations. Apart from our current bank balance of \$17,235.67, all of those funds have been contributed to deserving individuals and charitable organizations.

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