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BY MARYBETH LIMA

Reflecting on Katrina

Engineers must engage the community in addressing disenfranchisement.

THE SKY GETS HIGHER in September. A fellow graduate student taught me that proverb, which she translated from her native Korean. I've always loved that statement, and I feel like it's true. As I write this essay on my back porch in mid-September, the Louisiana sky is so high and so blue it's amazing. Still, Katrina is very much on my mind, and there's one thought I keep returning to.

I have known for years that if a Category 5 hurricane ever hit New Orleans, predictions were that 100,000 people would die. I learned a year ago that 130,000 people in New Orleans have no personal transportation and would constitute the vast majority of the 100,000 casualties. I accepted the latter statement as truth but didn't think to do anything about it. My lack of thought on this issue bothers me.

I've spent my professional life committed to service-learning in engineering. Service-learning is defined as an educational experience where students participate in an activity that meets community needs and helps students gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. For the past six years, I've worked with children in public schools in Baton Rouge and college students at Louisiana State University to design and construct dream playgrounds at public schools. We're on the way to making this happen throughout the city, and I'm currently on sabbatical trying to make this effort a reality statewide. I've been so committed to this endeavor

that I became almost myopic about other issues. Katrina jolted me back to reality.

The effects of Katrina are mind-boggling to me personally and professionally. The engineer in me is still critiquing inefficiencies in the collection, distribution and use of rescue efforts and resources, while the humanist in me is aghast at the tragedy and the vast differences in race, class

responsible.

Engineering professors have tremendous influence on how engineering is practiced and how problems are framed. We also have perspectives on the ways in which policy decisions affect technology and public welfare. I plan to redouble my efforts to engage students in these areas through service-learning. I plan to continue to work with community partners, students and government to create equal access, whether to a playground, a suitable dwelling or a hurricane es-

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and life in America that the hurricane exposed.

The first canon of engineering ethics is "engineers shall hold paramount the safety, health and welfare of the public." Our top ethical priority is society and the public. I've been thinking about this in the context of Katrina and that portion of the public that is disenfranchised. From this standpoint, what happened in New Orleans was a failure, an utterly predicted failure. It was not an engineering failure, it was a policy failure. I'm not blaming engineers or engineering; at the same time, as citizens, we're all partially responsible. As an engineer and a citizen of Louisiana, I feel particularly

cape route.

I am hoping that other engineering professors will do the same. There is a critical need in every community. There are implicit assumptions that must be examined and discarded and engineering problems with significant social context in every community. Today I wonder why I never questioned the supposition that those lacking transportation could lose their lives in a hurricane. Don't find yourself in my position. Engage your community in addressing these issues.

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