

# VOICES OF DETERMINATION AND HOPE

*The Story of Hurricane Katrina and the Mississippi Center for Justice*







# MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE

AN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO ADVANCING

RACIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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MISSISSIPPI  
CENTER  
FOR JUSTICE







## INTRODUCTION

When the Mississippi Center for Justice opened for business in 2003, board and staff had the audacity to believe that their state, traditionally at or near the bottom on most measures of economic and social progress, could become the social justice state.

The clarity and significance of this vision became more urgent—and perhaps even more audacious—when Hurricane Katrina devastated huge portions of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, affecting hundreds of thousands of lives for years to come. For the Mississippi Center for Justice, it was a call to action and an extraordinary opportunity to paint a picture of the social change they have in mind.

MCJ is a home-grown public interest law firm that advances the concept of community lawyering, in which lawyers work closely with community activists and leaders to help them achieve their goals. Litigation is only one of MCJ's many tools. Just as important are advocacy, public education, partnerships with local organizations, alliances with law firms and law schools from inside and



outside the state, and identification of successful social change models in other states to bring home to Mississippi. In the past year, MCJ called on every one of these strategies to address the crisis on the Coast.

This report is the story of the Mississippi Center for Justice in the year since Hurricane Katrina. It is the story of a small staff of professionals who galvanized a large and disparate community of local advocates, law students, volunteers and *pro bono* lawyers, many from outside the state. It is a story of frustration, compassion and some very concrete accomplishments. And finally, it is a story of hope, because this is a group of people determined to see racial and economic justice in Mississippi in their lifetimes—and to show the rest of the country what it looks like.

## BEYOND KATRINA

All the while MCJ was galvanizing around the emergency that Katrina delivered, staff and partners continued to work on other critical issues of social justice in Mississippi. In the past year, they tackled a number of issues on their original list of “dirty dozen” problems that face low-income Mississippians. Many of these were relevant in the post-Katrina environment on the Gulf Coast as well. Highlights of the year include:

- Predatory payday loan outfits blanket the state, taking advantage of low-income Mississippians with financial needs. Partnering with AARP, Enterprise Corporation of the Delta, University of Mississippi Civil Legal Clinic and Mississippi Trial Lawyers Association, MCJ inaugurated a Consumer Legal Resource Center to replace a pattern of unfair loans and credit with economically sound policies for both residents and businesses.
- MCJ and its legal and community partners have successfully disrupted the link between school house and jail house in the past two years by supporting litigation and legislative education to enact two rounds of juvenile justice reform legislation and provide community-based programs for families and children who get in trouble in school. Now they are advocating to ensure high-quality education for children with special needs, as well as for more funding for education in general.
- In partnership with Enterprise Corporation of the Delta and others, MCJ has launched the new Mississippi Economic Policy Center, which will provide credible, accessible and timely data analysis to educate policy makers, advocates and other stakeholders about the allocation of public resources. The new center brings Mississippi into the fold as a member of an increasingly influential national network of state fiscal analysis initiatives.
- Medicaid recipients and health care advocates are awaiting an anticipated federal court ruling on a motion for injunctive relief in their lawsuit challenging stringent new limits on Mississippi’s Medicaid prescription benefits. The new restrictions deny 5,000 – 6,000 Mississippians with chronic diseases and conditions access to medically necessary treatments. The suit was filed by MCJ and the legal team that successfully restored health benefits for 50,000 elderly and disabled Medicaid recipients in 2004.
- In collaboration with the International Center for Healing and the Law, MCJ convened community leaders for a series of Spirit of Justice retreats. Using cross-cultural stories from a variety of traditions to examine the relationship between justice and generosity, the retreats helped participants uncover their own individual gifts and identify the roles they can play in a new collective story of Mississippi as “the social justice state.”

# THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF KATRINA

The Mississippi Gulf Coast has weathered many a bad hurricane over the years, but the destruction of Katrina on August 29, 2005, veered toward the unimaginable.

The wholesale destruction meant that already dire problems, such as lack of adequate affordable housing, spiked into full-blown crises. Vulnerable communities were made even more vulnerable, since they had fewer resources to rely on in the emergency.

The infrastructure on the Coast was wiped out. For weeks, there was no electricity, phone, or Internet service. At MCJ's Jackson office, electricity was back within a week. Even with a tree smashed into the roof, staff members quickly returned to their posts.

The destruction on the Coast resulted in significant population shifts. The overall population on the Mississippi Coast decreased, but unlike New Orleans, which was left with a smaller population that was more white and less poor, the Mississippi Coast became less white and more poor. Many white homeowners who lost their homes left. African-American residents, whether homeowners or renters, did not leave, staying to clean up as best they could and living in their cars, in tents, in FEMA trailers when they became available, and doubling up with friends and family. Their needs were urgent.



*MCJ attorney John Jopling offers advice at a legal clinic.*

From the beginning, MCJ's small staff knew it would take all the emotional strength, stamina and legal intelligence they could muster to support the people of the region in an equitable rebuilding process. Their first order of business was to call a meeting to mobilize the legal resources they knew they would need to face the challenges ahead.

In an outpouring of support and concern, lawyers representing the full spectrum of the state's justice system came together in Jackson on September 8, 2005. There were representatives from the state's bar associations, private attorneys, legal aid providers, law school administrators and

the Mississippi attorney general's office. Some came from out-of-state to discuss coordinating *pro bono* support and recruiting student volunteers. Some came to Jackson from the Coast, still reeling from their own loss of homes and offices. They all gathered to assess the needs and bring the best legal thinking and support to the daunting tasks ahead.

## THE CATCH-22s OF RECOVERY

**B**ureaucracy reigns in everyday government, but it seems to be omnipotent in a crisis. MCJ staff witnessed roadblocks, hurdles, confusion and systematic resistance. Lawyers who showed up at the shelters right after the hurricane faced questions such as: How do I apply for FEMA relief when I have no electricity and no computer and they do not take handwritten applications? How can I apply for food stamps when I have no transportation to the office? Or how to address the fact that FEMA gave assistance only to the first applicant in a household, but that households are in a state of flux with some splitting up into several locations and others crowding together into one place.

MCJ was an ongoing source of legal advice, hand-holding and encouragement. Staff worked alongside Lawyers' Committee, legal services and *pro bono* lawyers handling insurance and mortgage questions, documenting reports of landlords who changed locks and raised rent, and helping people negotiate FEMA and state applications for relief. They began to reach out and build the foundation of a new legal system in Mississippi.

One of MCJ's clients, Sammie Gray, represents the frustration and hardship they witnessed every day. Mrs. Gray rented a small house in Gulfport that was damaged by Katrina, but depending on who you talk to, may still be habitable. Water ruined most of her furniture. There were holes in the outside walls and mold throughout the house. Some of her things were stolen in the days after the storm. There were snakes inside the house. She was the last on her block to get electricity back. As she explained, "My pole had kissed the ground, and even when they put [the electricity] back on, it surged out everything."

**"How do I apply for FEMA relief when I have no electricity and no computer and they do not take handwritten applications?"**

The first inspector to arrive condemned her house. The second said it was habitable, although Mrs. Gray pointed out that this man did not make it past the door to look inside the house—he said it was because of the snakes. In addition, it was dark when he came, and there was no electricity. Mrs. Gray went back and forth with FEMA about getting a trailer. When she finally got one, her landlord would not allow her to put it on the lawn. She was offered a spot for the trailer at another location, but for a charge of \$200 a month. She turned the trailer down, at which point FEMA denied her rental assistance claim.

In the months after the storm, Mrs. Gray lived at the VA hospital where she worked, lived out of her car, stayed with friends and relatives and applied for several apartments. She actually got one of the apartments, but it was so damaged that she found it unlivable. In the meantime, she developed carpal tunnel syndrome and had to have surgery. In March, she was laid off from her job.

Mrs. Gray heard about one of the workshops offered by the Lawyers' Committee and MCJ for people struggling with FEMA. "I bagged up everything I had and I went in," she said. MCJ and law student volunteers helped her with the FEMA appeals and advised her of her rights throughout the long ordeal. They helped her with paperwork and offered support that she had not received from any of the multiple government agencies she was trying so hard to deal with.

In August 2006, Mrs. Gray moved into a three-bedroom apartment, where her rent was double that of her former home. With MCJ's help, she finally received FEMA rental assistance that month, nearly one year after Katrina.



## MCJ BRANCHES OUT

Within weeks of the hurricane, MCJ set about establishing a physical presence on the Coast, staking out a beachhead in Biloxi and calling it the MCJ Katrina Recovery Office.

With crucial and immediate support from the JEHT Foundation and several smaller, emergency grants and gifts, MCJ reached out to lawyers on the Coast and hired housing advocate and attorney John Jopling and environmental justice lawyer Reilly Morse. Both are natives of the region with extensive public service experience and a fine-grained knowledge of the area's resources and politics. Their own law offices and practices had been devastated in the storm.

Jopling and Morse opened for MCJ business long before they actually had an office to go to. They worked out of their homes, their cars or disaster relief centers; they traveled to the airport or holed up in Internet cafes to get online. In December, they moved into a former doctor's office, a small building with numerous tiny rooms—a fortunate configuration for an influx of volunteers who were soon to arrive on their doorstep. In February 2006, MCJ hired another lawyer, Kim Duffy, a former legal services attorney who brought expertise in benefits along with skills in coordination of *pro bono* services.



*MCJ attorney Reilly Morse surveys the ruins of his former law office.*

Lawyers flocked in from around the country. Karen Lash took leave from Equal Justice Works and her Washington, D.C., consulting practice and brought national legal and media contacts. Bonnie Allen from the International Center for Healing and the Law brought funding and helped to organize community renewal retreats. Trisha Miller, a Skadden Fellow with MCJ's national affiliate, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and Jeremy Eisler and Dita McCarthy of the Mississippi Center for Legal Services became leaders of a growing team of legal circuit riders who volunteered themselves and others to address the burgeoning demand for help.

Individual case service was not part of MCJ's original mission. But the center could not respond to Katrina without responding to individuals who needed advice, support and hope. And so they did, all the while keeping in mind the original mission of collaboration, advocacy and raising the visibility of vulnerable communities.

## EVICTI ON P R E V E N T I O N

Sammie Gray was not happy in her rental home and wanted out. Elaine Barnes, a music teacher and choir director, was happy in her home, but was forced out.

Mrs. Barnes lived at Cypress Lane apartments in Gulfport for seven years. She enjoyed her place. The tenants were respectful and friendly. The landlady was a “beautiful person,” she said.

Mrs. Barnes’ apartment was not seriously damaged by Katrina, but the complex suffered considerable water damage. There was mold in many of the units and debris that was not cleaned up until May of 2006. “It looked like a hurricane hit there,” Mrs. Barnes noted with a grin. The tenants breathed “Katrina crud” for months, and many of them became ill. A new landlord was on the scene, and he issued eviction notices, despite the fact that tenants had valid leases. “Our landlord wanted the apartments so they could fix them and go up on the rent,” she said.

Mrs. Barnes and her neighbors found MCJ through an article in the newspaper. John Jopling took their case and won a settlement in which the landlord bought out their leases and returned their deposits. This was a success story, but it still left Elaine Barnes homeless



*MCJ clients Sammie Gray (above) and Elaine Barnes (opposite).*

after she moved out of Cypress Lane in May. In July, she was living with friends and hoping to get a FEMA trailer. As for finding another apartment, she said the picture looked bleak. “I heard that they want \$900 and up” for the new apartments and small houses that are currently under construction. She also heard that Cypress Lane was doubling the rent for remodeled units. If so, her former two-bedroom apartment will go for \$1200 a month.

Elaine Barnes’ story shows what MCJ attorneys and volunteers can do, as well as the hurdles they and their clients have to leap before people are settled in safe and affordable housing. Mississippi has few policies to protect renters from unfair or arbitrary rent increases or eviction. With the destruction of so many properties overnight, the rental market is exceedingly tight. Price gouging became the order of the day. If it sometimes felt like MCJ was up to its eyeballs in eviction cases, it was true. But as John Jopling said: “Every time I won one and kept someone in their home, I felt a huge accomplishment.” Needless to say, so did the tenants.











# THE ROLE OF LAW IN SOCIAL CHANGE

“Reconstruction on the Coast will happen,” said MCJ attorney Reilly Morse. “Those who speak will get something. Those who don’t will be passed over.”

On the Coast, MCJ is speaking. Its clients are speaking. Its partners are speaking. They do not intend to be passed over. And Katrina gives them the opportunity to do it right.

In a year full of chaos, the Mississippi Center of Justice has a lot to celebrate. Here is what they have done so far:

**The Policy Agenda:** MCJ has two policy priorities on the Coast, both related to the mega-problem of affordable housing. The first priority is to work with local partners to support the general campaign for more affordable housing during recovery. The second is a focus on the needs of renters.

Soon after the hurricane, the governor’s Recovery and Renewal Commission was the biggest game in town. MCJ had a place at the table, with Reilly Morse serving on the housing committee. Affordable housing was a cornerstone of the commission’s recommendations. The final report, which was released December 31, 2005, asked the right questions and recognized the needs of low-income residents without safety nets. The commission offered excellent recommendations, including suggestions for policy change at the state level, such as requiring developers to include a minimum percentage of affordable housing in order to get a permit to build. However, the report has been out for almost nine months, and the affordable housing section is at risk of gathering dust. MCJ is now focused on working with its partners to bring some life to those recommendations.

MCJ is also working in-depth on a specific subset of the affordable housing crisis: rentals. The goals are to help tenants get the FEMA relief they deserve, to improve landlord/tenant policies, to support tenants threatened with evictions, and to add to the current woefully insufficient number of rental opportunities on the Coast.

MCJ attorneys took on eviction cases like that of Elaine Barnes at Cypress Lane apartments. They represented renters in single-family homes, like that of Sammie Gray. In every eviction case they took, MCJ lawyers either prevented the eviction or negotiated a settlement in which landlords agreed to buy out leases. Each success served as a deterrent to other landlords looking to evict in order to raise rents.

Along the way, staff lawyers at MCJ and legal services also generated new information about the rental housing market. Even before Katrina, very little was known about the number or condition of apartments in the coastal counties. This was true despite the fact that 27% of the population on the Coast lives in rental units, higher than elsewhere in the state. After the hurricane, government statisticians could rattle off all kinds of data about privately owned housing stock. But no one had information on the rental market. Until MCJ.

A law student-led survey of every apartment complex in the three most damaged coastal counties was a first attempt to get the data. Were the apartment complexes still standing? Of those remaining, how many units are inhabitable? Has the rent increased? Are the

tenants being evicted? Have repairs been made? Do tenants know their rights and how to get help if they need it? The students began these surveys over the winter holidays, continued during semester break and spring holidays, and finished them in July. The data analysis was not complete as of August, but there was already information to use. MCJ learned that 75% of the rental housing in both Hancock and Harrison Counties was either destroyed or made uninhabitable. No wonder there is so much demand for MCJ's work.

Giving landlords a reason to resist the temptation to increase rent is another critical priority. Of the more than 60,000 rental properties that were damaged in Katrina, two-thirds of them are single family homes. MCJ is advocating for a plan that would let owners of rental homes get a share of the state's homeowner relief grant on the condition that they repair damage to the homes they are renting and continue to rent to low-income families. Louisiana already has this opportunity in their tool kit.

**Getting Help To Those Who Need It Most:** In the months after Katrina, the needs seemed endless. So many people did not know their rights or the level or type of relief they were entitled to. They did not know how to fight back when benefits were denied. In the case of the Vietnamese community, with a large population in East Biloxi, language was an added barrier to getting information and support.

The Lawyers' Committee organized and MCJ provided local staffing for a series of ongoing legal clinics and workshops. They advertised the meetings in local newspapers and on television and radio. People came in droves, clutching files stuffed with papers, FEMA applications, insurance forms and more. Student volunteers did the initial

interviews, getting the basic facts. Then lawyers from MCJ, Lawyers' Committee and private law firms who came from around the country sat with the families and answered specific questions. Topics focused on getting FEMA relief and trailers, landlord/tenant problems, insurance disputes and more. MCJ estimates they met with at least 1500 families, helping thousands receive emergency benefits.

FEMA, the federal agency charged with managing the aftermath, had a spotty physical presence in the beginning and a problematic one throughout the year. MCJ, Lawyers' Committee and their partners in the private bar helped families cut through FEMA's red tape and helped save the

day when FEMA was preparing to evict more than 3,000 families from trailers in April. Staff heard reports that a number of trailer residents had received notices calling on them to get out in June, the beginning of a new hurricane season. MCJ gathered information, interviewed people and managers at FEMA trailer parks and documented that these reports were more than a rumor.

Staff told the story to the media. National Public Radio and the Los Angeles *Times*, along with local press, covered it.

Lawyers' Committee contacted FEMA officials in Washington, D.C. Congressional staff heard the story and also contacted FEMA. The evictions were cancelled. This victory is a good example of how MCJ works.

The Vietnamese community in East Biloxi was particularly hard hit by the storm. Vietnamese came to the Mississippi Coast in the 1970's and 1980's and soon were the backbone of the shrimping and fishing industries. Some became small business owners and bought or rented single family homes. When Katrina burst through, their boats *and* their houses were

People came in droves,  
clutching files stuffed with papers,  
FEMA applications,  
insurance forms and more.



destroyed. Since many are not comfortable with English, they had an especially difficult time getting help. In mid-August, the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies held a meeting for the first time in Vietnamese to discuss their concerns about displacement by casinos and condominium developers. MCJ was there to provide legal assistance.

**Building Coalitions and Preserving Communities:** While working on day-to-day crises, MCJ still had to keep the long-term redevelopment picture in mind. One goal was to make sure recovery did not destroy the character of historic communities, particularly long-standing African-American neighborhoods and towns with a long history in the area. MCJ enlisted law student volunteers to help compile area histories and to interview local leaders.

In their work on the Coast, MCJ staff members were mindful of their original operating principles, supporting the synergy that comes from working with a variety of partners who share the same goals. Many nonprofit organizations on the Coast were knocked down by Katrina, but not out. MCJ helped them rebuild their infrastructures, collecting and facilitating distribution of printers, computers and laptops donated by law firms and corporations.

MCJ staff worked with local partners to coordinate knowledge about activities, services and future strategies around recovery. MCJ was a founding member of Steps, a coalition of grassroots advocacy groups working to coordinate recovery efforts. The coalition's name symbolizes steps to a new future, and it also captures the image shown around the world of so many homes on the Coast where concrete steps were all that was left after Katrina. Steps coalition leader Derrick Evans of the Turkey Creek Community Initiative spoke of the

group's purpose: "None of us has a monopoly on the truth or the facts, but collectively we've got tons." The Steps coalition, he added, "is an important step towards a comprehensive, fair, healthy, complete recovery, because if we defer to elected officials or other fragmented arbiters of public policy, we're doomed." Derrick Evans wants to help communities hold onto their unique character even as they rebuild. This is why the oral histories are so important and why it is critical to make sure the voices of each community are heard.

The value of community is front and center in all of MCJ's work. Katrina ironically has helped sharpen this focus. Sidney Rushing, a community leader and respected elder in Gulfport, said:

"I see an emergence of a sense of community. You didn't have that sense of community prior to the Katrina event."

**In every eviction case  
they took, MCJ lawyers either  
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**Building the Legal Service Delivery Infrastructure in Mississippi:** Katrina shocked everyone into realizing just how challenging it is to deliver legal services to the many people who need them on a daily basis, let alone in a crisis like Katrina. The legal services system in Mississippi—historically underfunded and understaffed—was not prepared. Since the hurricane, MCJ

staff has worked with their colleagues in the state's two legal aid programs and the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project to build a connective structure that in the future can help more lawyers solve more problems for more clients. There is already new software and a Legal Services Corporation-funded telephone system to allow better communication about cases. The partners are working on training manuals for volunteers and workshops to enhance the intake process. MCJ staff and volunteers participate in regular conference calls, helping set targets and deadlines. This is a long-term vision, which could make a big difference in how well the legal needs of the low-income community are met in the future.

## STUDENTS: ECHOES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

MCJ actively sought to include a place for law students and other volunteers to help and to learn. The center needed all the hands—and minds—they could get, but they also saw an opportunity to expose future attorneys to the values and legal strategies of social change. In the last year, MCJ hosted more than 200 law students and other volunteers—sometimes 30 at a time, making it a very full house in its small office. A lot of the work MCJ did could not have been done without these students.

In the beginning there was a bit of skepticism about how the small MCJ staff could organize an ongoing stream of students, some of whom could only come for a week or maybe two. Would there be enough useful projects for them to take on? The answer to this question became immediately apparent. Students took on valuable work from the moment they crossed the MCJ threshold in Biloxi. So much so that Equal Justice Works soon found a way to place AmeriCorps attorneys in hurricane-affected states, including one at MCJ to help coordinate and expand the law student effort.

Law students came from all corners of the country, from Columbia University to the University of Southern California, from Duke to the University of Michigan. And there was plenty for them to do. Their long list of tasks included the following: legal research, a survey of living conditions at apartment complexes in three hurricane-ravaged counties, oral histories of African-American community leaders, community outreach and education, client intake at legal clinics and more.



*Jaime Phillips came home to Mississippi from Chicago-Kent College of Law.*

Jaime Phillips, a third year law student at Chicago-Kent College of Law, heard about MCJ from one of his classmates who was passing out flyers about public interest work. On his first morning as a volunteer, he was out doing apartment surveys. Wendy Huff, a third year law student at Ole Miss, came thinking she'd stay for a week or two; in late July, she was in her eighth week and was still delaying plans to leave. Nadia Underhill, a Princeton graduate with a masters' degree in public policy, brought a specialty in affordable housing development, which was put to good use in Mississippi.

The students also brought an enormous amount of energy into the office. It was a revolving cast of characters, but their passion, their dedication and the fact that they gave up their vacations and paid to come work for free and sleep on the floor of a church boosted morale all around.

Many saw the students as the front line of a new youth movement. Sidney Rushing said, "I was introduced to this youth movement. There were students who were on their spring break. Rather than going to Cancun or whatever, they were down in Pass Christian and they were sweating nasty and

they were out there working their hearts out." Such an outpouring of compassion from out-of-state young people has not been seen in Mississippi since the civil rights movement.

The students made a difference in the lives of Mississippians all across the Coast. Mississippi also made an impact on the lives of the students. Nicolette Mendenhall, a University of Indiana law student, gave up a job in Spain to come to the Coast to do this work. She spoke about what it meant to *do* something, as opposed to just talking about problems. Jaime

Phillips grew up only 30 miles from Biloxi, and he felt like this was a way to “reconnect with the area.” When he actually saw the devastated areas, he realized it was “nothing like what I envisioned. It’s so much worse.”

Being in Mississippi also broke down a lot of stereotypes for the students, many of whom were surprised, not so much by the poverty, but that there were so many people working for social justice in the South. Working at MCJ gave students a chance to see an advocacy campaign in action, to learn how it works. It gave them the opportunity to see the faces behind the academic lectures they heard in school. One volunteer echoed others’ comments: “I’ve learned an absolutely amazing amount of stuff in two years of law school, but to actually do it, I think I will remember this *hugely* more than I will ever remember what I learned in the classroom. Now I have a face, a person that I helped, and I can say, ‘O.K. I did something for this person.’”

When asked if this experience would influence what they plan to do with their careers, the answer was a resounding “yes.” Wendy Huff, for example, had not planned to work in public interest law, but commented that “being here changes your whole perspective.” Now she will “definitely” think about public interest law.

Elaine Barnes worked with many different people at MCJ during her eviction case. She asked one volunteer how long she planned to stay. Mrs. Barnes reported that she replied: “Well, I’m gonna stay a little while, I think. I’m gonna help as many people as I can.”

These students will take their experiences with them—back to school and into their careers—whatever they decide to do and wherever they decide to work. They will also take a renewed awareness of the injustice, inequity and racism that still riddle this country. Even more important, they will take the conviction that they can make a difference.

**Building a Stable of *Pro Bono* Partners:** Even before the early September assessment meeting in Jackson, MCJ board and staff knew this crisis required outside support. Finding alliances with other local organizations was one of their key principles, but they knew that in this case they also had to actively look for *pro bono* help from both inside and outside the state. MCJ was able to rally a number of well-trained lawyers to join the hundreds of Mississippi lawyers who provided assistance at Disaster Recovery Centers and staffed the emergency hotline administered by the Mississippi Bar’s Young Lawyers Division for several months after the storm.

Of course, there was plenty of work to go around. But first they needed permission for out-of-state lawyers to practice in Mississippi. Two court orders in September and October enabled lawyers from some of the nation’s top law firms to get to work immediately and to continue to provide assistance under the administration of the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Program. The Lawyers’ Committee helped recruit attorneys from 20 national firms. In the last year, more than 50 lawyers came to Mississippi to work in-state and even more worked on Katrina-related projects such as FEMA appeals from their home offices, providing tens of thousands of hours of assistance.

Many attorneys came from law firms that knew little if anything about MCJ and not very much about Mississippi. Even law firms with a history of *pro bono* work usually serve clients in their own backyards. This experience gave lawyers a real sense of the problems faced by hurricane victims, as well as a new understanding of poverty and racial injustice and what that means to our country as a whole.

Noah Shaw, a litigator at Mintz Levin in Boston, focuses mainly on intellectual property issues in his everyday work. But in November 2005, he flew to Jackson for a conference



on affordable housing needs post-Katrina. Most of the participants were exhausted legal services lawyers, already hard at work, but MCJ specifically invited a number of attorneys from large national firms.

Shaw was shocked at the lack of resources available to the Mississippi legal services community. He returned energized from that conference and developed a long list of things his firm could do to help. He had no trouble recruiting his colleagues to join in the response. Their collective efforts, some in collaboration with *pro bono* efforts from other firms, will be useful far beyond Mississippi. The work includes:

- Development of a code of disaster laws to guide states and localities dealing with the aftermath of emergencies. The goal is fast and effective—as well as coordinated—response.
- A 50-state survey of landlord/tenant laws. Most states have at least some laws that ensure the rights of tenants. Mississippi has very few. Mintz Levin also helped develop advocacy materials to guide states that wish to strengthen their laws.
- User-friendly manuals and pamphlets to help residents understand their rights on a number of legal issues.
- A brief arguing for rent abatement in the case of property damage from natural disasters. This doctrine is generally accepted by states across the country, but not yet in Mississippi.
- Model briefs to guide lawyers on inequitable mortgage issues and representation of individuals who were victims of inequitable foreclosures.

- Representation of several nonprofit organizations on FEMA appeals.
- Representation of families who were relocated to the Northeast to help them get relief for lost property.
- Funding an Equal Justice Works Katrina Legal Fellow on the Coast. With support from the JEHT Foundation and AmeriCorps and matching funds from firms like Mintz Levin, Equal Justice Works placed a total of 19 new lawyers in the region.

The Mintz Levin work—and that of the other firms offering their lawyers' time and skills—has already made a big difference in Mississippi. It has also made a difference in the lives of the lawyers who answered the call. Noah Shaw said he became a lawyer because injustice of any kind “drives me crazy.” In Mississippi, he added, “I’ve been exposed to a world I would never have been exposed to. I feel like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing.”

**Telling the Story:** One important ingredient in successful advocacy is making sure the right people know what you need and why. Thus MCJ worked regularly with local and national media to make sure the public heard the voices of low-income families.

Many expected the Katrina story to die out after a few months, that the public would grow tired and forget. But the story of reconstruction turned out to be a powerful one. If people have the facts on an ongoing basis, they continue to care. As Reilly Morse said, “The heart of the nation is open to South Mississippi now in a way it never was before or probably ever will be again. This is the chance of a lifetime for us to tell our story.” That is good news, since this is a story that will not be over for years.







## ONE YEAR LATER

MCJ and its partners hit the ground running after Katrina, and they have not stopped since. They sometimes surprised even themselves when they reflected on how much they had done.

A sharp focus on the future coupled with a dose of reality in addressing the present helped thousands get emergency relief. The need for affordable housing is accepted as a priority; people understand what it means. John Jopling practiced housing law for 20 years before Katrina and didn't see it as very sexy: "I always thought that there was no future in housing law, that no one wanted to hear about affordable housing. Now in Mississippi affordable housing is *the* issue." In fact, without the work of MCJ and its partners, there would have been a recovery for some after Katrina, but a "nonrecovery" for many.

MCJ and its partners showed they could do extraordinary things in times of crisis. But every time staff thinks they've seen it all, something new under the sun turns up. In August, for example, they got wind that the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development had given permission to the Mississippi Regional Housing Authority to sell or transfer three federally subsidized public housing complexes on the Coast. This would mean that some 400 families, almost all of whom are poor, elderly or disabled, would be forced to find alternative housing.

Even before Katrina, Mississippi had a woefully inadequate supply of public housing. To sell or transfer three of the properties would reduce available housing even further for those who need it the most. MCJ, along with Lawyers' Committee and the Steps

coalition, is working to make sure these residents get access to affordable housing if they have to move. MCJ also wants to make sure the rehabilitation of these public housing complexes does not mean moving low-income people out of their communities.

Katrina affected everyone in Mississippi. On the Coast, there was no one who was not changed emotionally, who did not grapple with destruction and damage to their property or their offices. Yet so many chose to stay, to say yes to helping so many others. John, Reilly, Kim, Lauren, Denise, Yumeka, Crystal, Paheadra, Morgan, Hannah, Jeremy, Dita, Jessie, Trisha, Jon, John, Derrick, Karen, Bonnie—these are just some of the many who worked as staff or partners at MCJ's Katrina Recovery Office. They focused outward, on the communities and families who needed support before the storm and who need it even more now. If they implement models of change that work on the Coast in the post-Katrina crisis, they can replicate them across the state.

Low-income communities, African-American and Vietnamese communities, would likely have remained invisible during the recovery had it not been for the efforts of MCJ and its partners. Derrick Evans of Turkey Creek likes to say that there have been only three times in this country's history when the status quo has been successfully challenged: the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, and now Katrina.

Imagining Mississippi as the social justice state may not be so audacious after all.



# IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI

## IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI ...

where all residents recovering from a disaster receive immediate, fair and adequate help in rebuilding their lives.

## IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI ...

where legislative policy promotes equitable and affordable housing as part of every new development.

## IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI ...

where predatory financing is outlawed and low-income homeowners receive fairly priced credit to repair damaged homes after a hurricane.

## IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI ...

where incentives encourage landlords to offer apartments and homes at reasonable rents.

## IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI ...

where developers, contractors, business owners and landlords work with residents and neighborhoods to create vibrant, mixed-income communities for everyone.

Imagine Mississippi...the social justice state.

## 2005 CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE

### CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE DINNER HONOREES

#### Champion of Justice Awards

**Dr. L. C. Dorsey**, who, like her friend and mentor Fannie Lou Hamer, forged a path from her birth into a Delta sharecropping family to a pioneering role as civil rights champion, social worker and health care advocate.

**Michael Raff**, who made Mississippi his home in the 1960s and ever since has courageously built the capacity, made the connections and nurtured the community to advance racial and economic justice for all Mississippians.

#### Special, Posthumous Award to Honor the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law's Mississippi Volunteers

**Frank R. Parker** (1940-1997), legendary voting rights lawyer and director of the Lawyers' Committee Voting Rights Project, who helped make the right to vote a reality for thousands of Mississippians.

#### Recognition for Providing Exemplary *Pro Bono* Service to Hurricane Katrina Survivors

**Amanda Jones, Kenneth J. Grigsby, David Maron, and Bradley Arant Rose & White LLP**

### MISSISSIPPI ON THE POTOMAC RECEPTION HONOREE

**Mississippi Congressman Bennie G. Thompson**, for his steadfast support of MCJ's work on juvenile justice reform and access to health care.

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We thank the many community organizations and advocacy groups who have welcomed us to their campaigns for social justice throughout the state and allowed us to offer them our legal assistance. We thank the state, regional and national organizations whose generous and capable assistance allowed us to keep our commitment to provide the right legal help at the

right time to accelerate the pace of change in Mississippi. And this year we express our special gratitude to the hundreds of individual lawyers and law students from around the county and to their law firms, corporate legal departments and law schools for generously contributing their exceptional talents to meet massive legal needs in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

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Each contribution helps to secure a home-owned capacity for legal advocacy to advance racial and economic justice in Mississippi. We are immensely grateful for the generous support of the foundations, institutional contractors, law firms, corporations and individual donors who make our work possible.

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Harold & Joicelyn Mayfield  
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## STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES

### FOR THE YEAR ENDED DECEMBER 31, 2005

#### SUPPORT AND REVENUES

Contributions	\$495,957
Grants	1,158,300
Interest and dividends	510
Miscellaneous	2,092
Contract Services	10,000
Gain on insurance from Hurricane Katrina related damage	25,145
Net assets released from restrictions	—

<b>TOTAL SUPPORT AND REVENUES</b>	<b>1,692,004</b>
-----------------------------------	------------------

#### EXPENSES

Program Services	652,674
Management and general	45,472
Fundraising	89,251

<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>787,397</b>
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<b>INCREASE (DECREASE) IN NET ASSETS</b>	<b>904,607</b>
--	----------------

<b>NET ASSETS AT BEGINNING OF YEAR</b>	<b>405,361</b>
--	----------------

<b>NET ASSETS AT END OF YEAR</b>	<b>\$1,309,968</b>
----------------------------------	--------------------

MCJ's Statements of Activities and Financial Position presented here for 2005 have been audited by the Jackson, Mississippi, accounting firm of Matthews Cutrer & Lindsay, P.A.

Complete financial statements may be obtained by contacting MCJ.

## STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

### FOR THE YEAR ENDED DECEMBER 31, 2005

#### ASSETS

##### CURRENT ASSETS

Cash	\$591,979
Investments	—
Receivables	737,011
Prepaid expenses	—
	<b>1,328,990</b>

##### PROPERTY AND EQUIPMENT, net

158,637

##### OTHER ASSETS

Deposits	2,006
	<b>\$1,489,633</b>

#### LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

##### CURRENT LIABILITIES

Accounts payable	\$36,738
Accrued expenses	18,526
Payroll liabilities	1,134
Deferred revenue	1,000
Notes payable, current portion	17,466

74,864

##### NOTES PAYABLE, net of current portion

104,801

##### NET ASSETS

Unrestricted	50,578
Temporarily restricted	1,259,390
	<b>1,309,968</b>
	<b>\$1,489,633</b>





## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Writer Joanne Edgar, photographer Mike Lang and designer Chris Lester have joined forces again to present this report about MCJ and Hurricane Katrina, reprising the artful storytelling of last year's *Voices of Change*. We are very grateful to them for fitting this project into their demanding schedules and for so compellingly giving voice to this latest chapter of our story.

