

## Lesson at the River

by Patrick F. Baxter

It had been weeks since Hurricane Katrina had struck my beautiful city in the early morning hours of August 29, 2005. Though it had come and gone, it left behind an enduring impact on not only the structures in the city, but many lives, including my own.

I was a New Orleans Police Officer during Hurricane Katrina. At the time, my partner was Tyrone Mills, affectionately known as "Tee Mills." He was a respected veteran with twenty years of experience. He always sported a smile, even though his home had been destroyed by the hurricane, and his family had evacuated out of state. I couldn't understand how he was happy all the time. Even though my wife had recently returned, my son and daughter had been left in the care of in-laws, out of state. In hindsight, that was a good thing. Less to worry about.

The city had remained mostly desolate for weeks after the storm. Many had evacuated the city in order to escape the hurricane. Those who remained were emergency workers, military personnel and those who could not or would not leave. They were given an

up close look at the devastation caused by a category four hurricane.

The sidewalks were lined with piles of trash and refrigerators sealed with duct tape. They had been taped to prevent being opened and releasing the smells of rotted food and meat. Flies were everywhere! They were robust and appeared to fly in slow motion. The smell was unbelievably pungent. Homes and streets smelled of rotting meat, stagnant water, and a hint of death.

One day, about two weeks after the storm, Tee Mills and I were on patrol in the area of Canal Street. We saw an older black man on his knees in the middle of the streetcar tracks. He was wearing a dingy white shirt and wrinkled khaki pants. He wore red and white high top Puma tennis shoes. He appeared to be upset. His shoulders were sunken. We exited our patrol car and walked up to him. He held his hands at his sides and was sobbing uncontrollably. He was crying so hard, his body convulsed.

Tyrone gently placed his hand on the man's shoulder and the man slowly looked up. His unshaven face was wet with tears. Tyrone whispered "What's wrong man?" Through his sobs, he replied.

"Man, I took money from my niece! My eleven year old niece! Who does that? Who takes money from a child? I can't get right!" I asked him how he took the money and why. He paused for a bit and said "I went in her bedroom and took it out of her purse! I took

it because I can't get right! I ain't no good!" He continued to cry. Tyrone assured him that the money could be returned, but he continued to cry. I placed my hand on the man's other shoulder. I asked if he wanted to speak to our police chaplain or someone regarding the incident. He said no, and rose to his feet. He used his shirt to wipe the tears from his face, and took a deep sigh. I again offered the services of our chaplain and he again refused. "I'm good. I just want to leave. Thank you." As he walked away, I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

An hour later, we were dispatched to a call of unknown trouble at the New Orleans River walk, along the Mississippi River. As we arrived on scene, we received additional information from our dispatcher. The information stated a body had been found floating near the River walk by a passing riverboat. A crew member of the river boat secured the body using a long pole fashioned with a hook at the end and was keeping the body from floating away. I walked on the bottom level of the dock, while Tyrone walked on the second level, looking for the crew member. We both arrived at the dock edge at the same time. We noticed a tall sinewy sunburnt middle aged white male standing near the side of the riverboat. He was holding a long pole with a hook on the edge. The hook was secured to the belt loop of the pants on the submerged body. As the employee saw us, he pulled slightly

upward on the pole, and the body rose above the surface of the water. My gaze was immediately locked on the shoes. White and red high top Puma tennis shoes. I stared at those shoes for several moments. Everything seemed still, empty. I glanced up at Tyrone. He was staring at the body. After a moment, he turned towards me and our eyes locked. We both shook our heads. It was a silent acknowledgement of another life taken by Katrina. We contacted the necessary support units and documented the required paperwork. We finished our tour of duty, as we had done numerous times before.

After arriving home, I took off my duty belt and uniform as I had done countless times before. As I did so, I reflected on the day's events. I was suddenly overcome with emotion. I couldn't contain myself. I sobbed uncontrollably. I cried so hard, my body convulsed. I was crying so hard, I was unaware my wife had entered the room. She placed her hands around my head and let me cry. Tears flooded my eyes like the river that runs through my favorite city. After I finished crying, I realized that I was not just crying for the old man in the white and red Puma tennis shoes, and my city but for myself! I realized that during Katrina, I had detached myself from feeling, more than I usually did. I ignored my emotions in order to do the job! This is never good, but during a natural disaster and the unpredictability

which followed, it was a terrible response. I was focused on completing the task, and not dealing my emotional needs.

Several months after Katrina, I attended a motivational seminar entitled "Recovering from Traumatic Events" by a retired Louisiana State Trooper. Several officers who suffered through Katrina were in attendance. Trooper Bobby Smith had been seriously injured in the line of duty. In 1986, a shotgun blast stole his sight. The loss of his sight stole his independence, as well as his career. He would eventually divorce. Later, a car accident took the life of his 22 year old daughter. After bouts with severe depression and self-doubt, he found his purpose was to help others who face life changing events. As he told his story, he educated us on how to positively deal with traumatic incidents and stressful situations. He also stressed the importance of cherishing the moments we share with friends, family and the people we encounter on a daily basis. These missed moments can never be recaptured once lost.

I would love to say that this was the last traumatic incident that I dealt with as a police officer, but it wasn't. I have endured countless traumatic incidents throughout my career. However, I have learned that dealing with stressful situations can be manageable and not overwhelming. While working at Georgia Tech as a Police Officer since 2013, I have encountered

students, staff and faculty in the GT community who have experienced situations that required police assistance. The enduring impact of my experiences during Katrina allow me to handle any situation with empathy and understanding. I owe this gift to a lesson learned on that fateful day near the Mississippi River.