

ABOUT *RENAISSANCE VILLAGE*

I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to speak about my film, *Renaissance Village*. It is not likely a film you will have seen on the shelves at Blockbuster or for download on Netflix. In fact, *Renaissance Village* has not received distribution through any major film company. When I asked these companies why they decided to pass on the film, the answer was always the same: because people don't care any more about Hurricane Katrina and formaldehyde poisoning in the FEMA trailers. This committee hearing, I believe, proves them wrong.

Renaissance Village is named for the largest FEMA trailer park that was established after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005. The film was produced over the course of eighteen months from January 2007 to June 2008 and focuses on five residents desperately trying to reassemble their lives after losing nearly everything in the storms.

My production crew and I stumbled upon Renaissance Village by chance while traveling with the mobile care clinics provided by the Children's Health Fund of New York. After speaking with some of the park's residents, I knew that their stories needed to be told, and decided to shift the focus of our film from examining the post-Katrina healthcare situation in Louisiana to life inside a FEMA trailer park. At that time no one in the media, government, or inside the park was talking about formaldehyde in FEMA trailers. But amid the chaos of being displaced from their homes for nearly two years, losing nearly all of their personal belongings in the storms, and having to navigate their way through layer upon layer of government bureaucracy to receive the benefits they were promised, residents in Renaissance Village were hit with more bad news: their government-provided trailers were unsafe to live in and posed a serious threat to their health. I was an eyewitness to the transformation many residents experienced as they went from victims of a natural disaster to victims of federal negligence. Many of them expressed to me feeling like the bastard child that no one wanted, that no one cared for; like they were "lost at the Red Sea and waiting for it to open up."

Emails pertaining to the presence and dangers of formaldehyde in the trailers, revealed during the July 2007 government oversight committee hearing led by Congressman Henry Waxman of California, signified the deceptive posture taken by FEMA. Lawyers told their field staff, "Do not initiate any testing until we give you the OK.... Once you get results, should they indicate some problem, the clock is running on our duty to respond to them." Another email from the Office of General Council "advised that we do not do testing, which would imply FEMA's ownership of this issue." These emails only reinforced the blow sustained by park residents. The government knew about the formaldehyde and its danger and chose silence over helping residents, for fear of getting a black eye.

On July 9, 2008, FEMA distributed a press release entitled "FEMA Statement on Formaldehyde" (<http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=44961>), which

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acknowledged that the agency would test trailers in all the parks. In addition FEMA established a call center to take questions and distributed 70,000 leaflets to occupants of FEMA trailers. Though these are honorable measures to take after exposing thousands of American citizens to a known carcinogen, I never witnessed any FEMA representative talking one-on-one, in detail, with any of the residents about the formaldehyde issue. I did see FEMA fliers taped to trailer doors that defined formaldehyde and the symptoms of exposure and advised residents on how to protect themselves.

Residents received the majority of their information about the formaldehyde issue from local and national news television. This created even more panic and fear. Residents had no one easily accessible and in person to turn to for reliable answers to their questions and concerns. Had FEMA taken the extra effort to go door to door and actually ask residents if they were OK, a lot of fear and ill will could have been spared. As one resident, Paul Thomas, states in the film, “I have never heard of a FEMA representative come back here on this property and come to each individual and let us know that this is what is going to happen. It’s always hearsay and 95% of the time, it never happens.”

To be fair, FEMA established a hotline that trailer residents could call for support; however, this method of seeking answers proved ridiculously frustrating. Two scenes in the film convey this experience. In the first, one resident, James, attempts to contact FEMA after the agency fails to arrive in the park to test trailers for formaldehyde. After talking with the FEMA agent on the phone for several minutes she gives him another number to call – the same one he has just dialed. After James informs her of this he is put on hold and eventually is disconnected. In a later scene, resident Tyrone Creesy is trying to contact FEMA about his hotel arrangements after he has relinquished his trailer with the understanding that he will receive a free 30-day stay in a hotel. Again, FEMA has no record of this arrangement, and he is given the runaround. Tyrone ends up sleeping at a friend’s house for an extended period and then has to move back to Shreveport to live with his father. Tyrone is forty years old.

During a park-wide council meeting, Wilbert Ross, the unofficial president of Renaissance Village, summed up the residents’ outrage succinctly and directly for everyone to hear. “As a people we need to come together and demand that they [FEMA] take care of our health – long-term. We are a people forgotten...The majority of you, 98% that are in trailers, also are black, and/or poor American citizens. Either one means the same to your government: you can’t help him, he don’t think about helping you.”

Though FEMA did, in fact, offer residents 30-90 day stays in hotel rooms to vacate the formaldehyde-tainted trailers, this did not quell residents’ fears about the long-term effects of their exposure to the carcinogen. In a candid interview, Wilbert Ross admits that he advised other residents to turn down FEMA’s offer. “They go out the gate, get their apartment, FEMA takes care of them...and then cut them loose. They’re on their own – on their own with their health, on their own with everything. When it comes down to your medical, with the effects that it’s [formaldehyde] been having on peoples’ bodies

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back here, I think FEMA should be responsible and I think they [the residents] should be holding out until they're sure that FEMA is going to cover.”

The discovery of formaldehyde in the trailers created more panic, confusion, hurt, and fear in my view, than the storms themselves. The hurricanes were tangible and visceral – they left a visible path of destruction. One could witness, mourn, and recover from these losses. The trailers, on the other hand, were alive with an “invisible killer.” Every breath left trailer occupants wondering if that breath were going to contribute to their demise 5, 10, or 30 years down the road. Long-term effects of formaldehyde have been linked to nose, lung, and other types of upper respiratory cancer. FEMA knew about the problem and made a conscious choice to do nothing. As a daily witness to the lives of residents inside Renaissance Village, I can tell you that this made them feel cheated and expendable, like animals in a grand experiment in which their lives meant nothing. FEMA's offer to relocate the residents only made some residents more suspicious: Was this an attempt to push trailer residents out of the system after 90 days and refute any future responsibility for medical problems that residents might have? As I will talk about later, this distrust of the government was not so much a result of eighteen months of working with FEMA, but rather based on decades of racial and socioeconomic injustice experienced by those living in the park.

It is important to point out that I tried to keep the story told in *Renaissance Village* as objective as possible. My goal in creating this film was not to placate the federal government or the park residents. When I told people in Baton Rouge and Baker, Louisiana, why I was living in their city and what I was working on, I was more often than not met with degrading, racially charged accusations similar to what one might hear thrown at an ACLU member visiting the Jim Crow south during the 1950s and 60s. Many Baton Rouge and Baker residents expressed feelings of confusion: Why were the residents of Renaissance Village not doing more to help themselves? Why did the park's residents not feel the same obligation to find work like everyone else?

And there is some truth to this; many of the park residents that I met simply sat around waiting to be told what to do by FEMA. Many expressed the sentiment that they were owed by the government, not only for losses and damages sustained during and after the storm, but for decades of neglect. On the other hand, there were those in the park who tried their best to get back on their feet on their own terms, without taking any, what they would consider, “handouts,” from the government. One man I met woke at 4 a.m. every morning, took a 90 minute bus ride to New Orleans, worked all day, returned to his FEMA trailer at 7 p.m., and repeated the process six days a week.

My filming in Renaissance Village corresponded with the initial expiration of the Stafford Act, the federal legislation created to assist victims of disasters. As you know, this legislation limits the provision of housing for disaster victims to 18 months. FEMA extended this deadline indefinitely to give residents more time to find permanent housing. At this point, a year and a half after the storms, those that were able to leave Renaissance Village were long gone. Those remaining had nowhere to go and no resources to fall

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back on. As Wilbert Ross says in the film, “The people that could get out – gone – already gone. Not coming back. The folks that are here, most of them are stuck, without a hope or a prayer.” The feeling inside the park shifted, from a transitional community to a permanent home.

Before the storm, many of the residents were receiving federal welfare and experienced subsistence-style living that created a dependence on the government. This dependence was reinforced and exacerbated after the storms when citizens were moved into federal housing. When they didn’t get the things from the government they were used to receiving, many residents simply shut down: fear, anxiety, and depression took over. Substance abuse rates skyrocketed. I remember meeting people who were so depressed that they left their trailers only to get food from whichever private organization was distributing it that day.

The film brings to light some important facts about the population living in Renaissance Village. Approximately 65% of the park’s residents were unemployed, and nearly all of those who remained in the park were African American. Eighty percent had lived beneath the poverty line in some of the poorest neighborhoods in New Orleans. In the 18 months since the storm, those neighborhoods had not been rebuilt.

To make matters worse, no general or mental health facilities existed on the premises. The only on-site care was provided by private organizations such as The Children’s Health Fund, who would drive Greyhound-style buses onto the premises and provide medical and mental health care out of the back of the bus. People would have to wait in line in the 100 degree summer heat to be seen by a doctor or mental health worker. If additional tests were needed, park residents had to find private transportation into town. Most residents didn’t have cars. In New Orleans, many of the park’s residents had depended on public transportation to shuttle them around town. Public transportation like this didn’t exist in Baker, the nearest town, two miles away. Without private transportation, residents had to wait for the FEMA provided bus that would only arrive every couple hours and was often grossly off schedule. Health care was hard to come by. And if residents found employment, it usually didn’t last very long because without reliable transportation they would repeatedly be late to work and subsequently fired

The living conditions in Renaissance Village were appalling. Every gentle breeze brought with it the pungent odor of cow manure from the surrounding pastures. The lack of trees or natural growth on park grounds made it impossible to escape the scorching sun. Temperatures would often rise above 100 degrees Fahrenheit during the summer, forcing people to stay in their trailers. This became a major source of anxiety and psychological trauma for residents once they learned about the toxic levels of formaldehyde present in their trailers. Residents felt like they were being forced to choose between staying cool in their trailers while risking their health, or staying outside exposed to the sun and heat. FEMA’s recommendation to residents was to keep trailer doors and windows open to vent the formaldehyde, but that prevented people from being

able to cool units with air conditioning. As one resident described it, the experience of living in the trailers was like slowly being poisoned by “a silent ghost.”

One day I traveled with some residents to the local Walmart where they were going to be doing their grocery shopping. The process required extraordinary timing on the residents’ part. For example, if the bus were scheduled to arrive in two hours to pick up residents from Walmart, they would have to time when to buy their meat and dairy products so that the groceries wouldn’t rot in the sun while waiting for the bus. If they were late coming out, they would miss the bus and their food would go bad waiting for the next bus. If the bus were late, they would be waiting outside and their food would go bad. Countless times I witnessed the slow curdling of milk as it went from liquid to solid in the Louisiana sun. This, to me, came to represent Renaissance Village and the people living there – the slow deterioration of a community that was waiting for something that never really came – safety, security, peace of mind, a sense of direction, a return to their former lives.

All of the instances noted above were compounded by an already existing sense of being wronged by the government: decades of racism, neglect, impoverishment, and socio-economic isolation hardened into feelings of dejection and worthlessness. In an intimate scene in the film, Gwendolyn Allen and Thelma Howard share with us their experiences growing up in the Jim Crow south. “Children today, they got it good. They don’t know what hunger is and how back in the fifties, you know, things weren’t straight then. They had racism, they had a little bit of everything...Like we are today, we can stand and talk, white and black, back then you couldn’t do all that. You had to say ‘yes sir’, ‘yes ma’am’, ‘no ma’am’, ‘yes sir’...” says Gwendolyn. Thelma interjects. “I was from Mississippi in the fifties. I’ve seen some things I don’t even care to mention...” She continues to tell the story of when her uncle was lynched and his body thrown in her front yard, “and you could see where the rope was around his neck.”

The residents of Renaissance Village were not simply people in need of disaster assistance – the residents needed reassurance that their existence mattered to their government, to their neighbors, and to the American people. They needed to know that someone cared about them. After hanging a formaldehyde tester on his ceiling to test the levels of the toxin in his unit, Wilbert Ross sits exhausted on his bed as he reflects, “We learned not to trust FEMA on anything that they say. If they can’t put it in writing, we don’t want it because they’re liars. Everything they tell us is lies...They lied to the public, they lied to the media, you know what I’m saying? And at the same time we are supposed to just turn our backs and look the other way and keep going – you cannot do that. These folks don’t forget. I just feel like we’re a part that’s always been on the downside of America. That we’re the ones that have been least respected by America. No matter what we do we never come up to fit their standards. No matter how much money you have, how much education you have, you still looked down on because of your skin color.” This is the real story of *Renaissance Village*.