

New Orleans Independent Media Center

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An Unfragmented Movement: Interview with Shana Griffin

by Joanna Dubinsky *Friday, Jan. 06, 2006 at 7:50 AM*

joanna.dubinsky@gmail.com

An interview with Shana Griffin, one of the leaders of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition. This article was first published in the independent journal *Against the Current*. "It is not "what can I do," but "what can we do." Shana argues that organizing, especially organizing post-Katrina, requires collective action. "To build this [movement] we have to put all our own agendas aside and look to the people most adversely impacted, and that is the challenge."

An Unfragmented Movement: Interview with Shana Griffin

The People are the City

by Joanna Dubinsky

"I'M NOT INTERESTED in developing an action plan to rebuild/organize a people's agenda in New Orleans without a gender analysis and a demand for community accountability."

It had been two weeks since Katrina's floodwaters and the government's indifference was unleashed on the city of New Orleans: two weeks spent in anguish and outrage—searching for information, analysis, and hope. I was thinking about how to wrap my mind around everything — especially wondering where the feminist analysis was — when this email demanding gender analysis popped into my email inbox.

I wasn't surprised that it came from Shana Griffin, life-long resident of New Orleans, activist, organizer and self-described Black feminist. I had known Shana for several years, through sometimes common political work and overlapping social circles. I immediately shot an email back, and we promised to talk.

In our exile Shana and I have crossed paths several times, including the Penn Center in South Carolina, the location of the second meeting establishing the People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition. It was at this meeting where fellow survivors selected her to be on the nine-person Interim Coordinating Committee. We've been on conference calls and seen each other twice in New Orleans since my "permanent" return.

Shana is living in the diaspora -- her temporary home base is Philadelphia, where her son Jamal is enrolled in school until his New Orleans school reopens in January. In our too-brief conversations, we agreed to set aside time to discuss building the movement for self-determination in New Orleans. I decided that it should be an interview, because there are too few voices -- especially women's voices — coming out of New Orleans, and I wanted hers to be heard.

JD: First, for some background for folks who don't know much about New Orleans, what was it like, for you, coming up in New Orleans?

SG: I grew up in a socio-economically isolated setting, the Iberville Housing Development (the public housing project near the French Quarter), in a predominantly Black neighborhood. So from an early age, I was able to look at the disparity of access to resources between my neighborhood and the rest of downtown.

My mother wouldn't let me go to the school in the neighborhood; I went to school in the French Quarter. My school was 60% white and 40% people of color, mostly African American. At the time, the French Quarter was less white than it is today -- it was more mixed -- and I would go from that setting back to my home setting, which was all Black. I knew something wasn't quite right, but I couldn't name it. I didn't know how to talk about it.

Also I grew up in a household with eight kids — four boys, four girls — and with my mom and dad, that was household of 10. We were also one of the few households that had both parents in the house. And that was

interesting, coming from a family that had equal boys and girls, examining how my mom responded to her sons, as opposed to how she responded to her daughters. And being a twin, with a twin brother, I could see how -- not just my mom — my entire family and other individuals responded to him being a boy and me being a girl.

So how you were supposed to respond to different gender roles became very clear to me at a young age. And being in a socio-economically isolated place, I was acutely aware of the fact that poor people worked extremely hard — everybody I knew worked — but they still had very little. At school, some of the white children would talk about how their moms didn't work; yet they had so much.

This was something striking about growing up in New Orleans. In terms of culture, you can look at the Black Mardi Gras vs. the traditional/French Quarter or white Mardi Gras experience to see the difference.

JD: Could you talk about that a little bit more?

SG: Actually, I'm not a very big fan of Mardi Gras. (We both laugh). Not at all.

But the experience is just so different for Black and white people. The self-presentation, the art forms of Black people are very different.

In the Black community, Mardi Gras is when you step-out; it is when you exhibit your style. One of the worst things you can do on Mardi Gras day is bump into a Black person and pour some beer on their outfit; it would almost be like violating their honor. I don't know how else to describe it, but it's a presentation of cultural identity. There is a sense of style; people exhibiting their style.

But Black Mardi Gras is also about location; where people congregate. Have you ever been around Orleans & Claiborne on Mardi Gras?

JD: Yeah, I've been there. It is different than Uptown or French Quarter Mardi Gras!

SG: Black people (in New Orleans) present themselves in a number of ways: you think about the Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs, the Black Men of Labor or — during Mardi Gras — the Mardi Gras Indians, baby dolls and brass bands. Mardi Gras is just one part of this is year-long activity of self-presentation, style, celebration, festival and ritual in Black New Orleans.

JD: How did your experiences coming up — you mentioned seeing this disparity between the Black and white communities of New Orleans, and your experience around gender in and outside your family — influence you becoming an organizer and a feminist?

SG: I spent 23 years of my life in the Iberville Public Housing Development, so it shaped not just my life work, but my identity, in terms of me identifying as a Black feminist. Being in this densely populated, yet socially isolating environment — isolated from economic and political resources — had a big imprint on me in terms of organizing. My mother was the president of the Iberville Housing Council for 15 years, a pretty long time. I had to participate in different community events, as it relates to the neighborhood. So we had this sense of obligation — myself and my siblings— whether it was participating in a neighborhood cleanup, or distributing school supplies, or distributing Christmas Gifts in the neighborhood.

Also, the very first job I had was at a homeless clinic; I was 15 at the time. Having this experience of living in a housing development and then working at a homeless shelter also illustrated to me how services provided reflect the needs of men, but don't always address the needs of women and other communities who are also marginalized — queer, transgendered, gay/lesbian communities, immigrants and native people.

But my mom's housing organizing was the catalyst by which I became politicized. Being in that environment, I was also acutely aware of relationships between poverty, substance abuse, inter-relationship violence, institutional racism, savage inequality around education, as well as the over-policing of communities of color.

That environment — the social ills of that environment — is reflected in all of the organizing that I have engaged myself in. I look back on movement building that I have done, I have tried to bring all these things together which in organizing are usually separated. But we don't just experience gender-based violence, we don't just experience racism, or privilege for that matter — we don't just experience one thing in a vacuum — and my life's work has been to bring these things together, to create an unfragmented movement.

JD: Could you talk more about your organizing work — such as your work with INCITE! [Women of Color Against Violence National Collective – ed.] or your anti-prison work — and how you see building these projects as building an unfragmented movement?

SG: When I come to a meeting — when I build a project — I want to engage my whole person, not just one piece of myself that is engaged in, say, education work, while ignoring all the feminist organizing that I do. So one of the

things that I think is crucial for me, if I'm at a table, is that table has to be round, and it has to engage my whole person and experiences of others who may not be at that table, or else I have to step back.

Before I became a member of INCITE! National, I was already thinking about interrelationship violence. I don't know one woman who has not been sexually violated at one point in her life -- whether that was a sexual assault by a friend or family member, a rape by an acquaintance, or being engaged in a relationship where they had to submit to something that was uncomfortable to them out of fear of how that person would respond to them.

That is one piece of it. The other layer is that I have three sisters-in-law, and all three were sexually abused by a family member. My mother was sexually violated by her sister's husband, when he attempted to touch her in ways that were inappropriate. She was also raped by my father, which led to her first child being born. And all of her sisters experienced some sort of sexual violence.

So this experience, coupled with the experience of all the women I know, just showed to me that violence against women has almost become a norm. Because of this, my mom wouldn't let me participate in slumber parties, because she didn't trust the father, brother or uncle of the child.

When I was teaching, I was talking to my students about domestic violence and sexual assault, and what their rights and responsibilities are. And one student could not believe that I had been in a relationship where my partner never slapped me. It just shows how deep this, how normal it is, the expectation that two people who "love" each other would hit on each other, or emotionally or financially abuse each other.

Before even coming to INCITE! I had this awareness of different levels of violence that women experience in their lives, especially women of color. I was the Graduate Coordinator of the UNO Women's Center, but my biggest critique with that work was that this wasn't just happening on college campuses — college students come from communities, right?

When I was doing that work, I was doing work with Education Not Incarceration, which gave birth to Critical Resistance Chapter in New Orleans. But when I was doing this anti-prison work — discussing the abolition of prisons — there was no space to dialogue about the violence that women experience within our community. I was like: yo! —we're talking about the state violence that is done to our community, but not talking enough about the violence which is done within our community.

So coming to INCITE! was like coming home, because we could talk about and challenge both — the violence perpetrated by the state against communities of color, and violence within communities of color. But to add another layer to that, we also look at the violence the state perpetrates against other communities around the world, and even in North America, if you look at indigenous peoples, and how communities of color here benefited from that violence.

And moving forward with both of these movements, anti-violence and anti-prison work, and taking it another step, we said we have to do the work — the organizing — together, we can't just focus on one without the other. That is another example of engaging the whole person, not dividing them. I can't just walk into a room and say I'm a Black person. I'm a Black woman, who is a daughter, who is a mother, who teaches — so this is about not trying to divide myself in this work, or dividing the people in our communities.

I became involved in INCITE! locally in 2000; by fall of 2003 I was nominated to become part of INCITE National Organization. And INCITE National has a relationship with Critical Resistance National.

JD: We'll get back to organizing when we talk about Post-Katrina work. Could you talk about your experience evacuating from Katrina, and also explain past evacuation experiences to give folks context who have never lived in a hurricane-prone place?

SG: All my life I was aware of the devastation that Hurricanes Betsy and Camille caused to the city of New Orleans. Growing up, I was also aware that the Big One was going to come, but no one knew for sure when it would occur. Public housing was actually one of the safest places you could be during a hurricane. Many developments were on higher ground, built high off of the ground, and many of the buildings were very strong. I was born in 1974, and we never evacuated growing up.

When we didn't live in the housing development anymore, we had to rethink a strategy to ride out a storm. My family first evacuated in 1999; five years later, in 2004, I evacuated for Hurricane Ivan. I didn't want to leave, but my mom left with my son the day before. I didn't leave because I was afraid of the hurricane, I was afraid of making my mom upset!

Again, the city just experienced some rain, not much else. Many people realized that the city didn't have a solid evacuation plan. Most people went west, and we went east to Atlanta to avoid the traffic. By the time we left, twelve hours after my mom, they were only [the equivalent of] two hours away from New Orleans.

In terms of Hurricane Katrina, it was strange because the hurricane wasn't even on my radar. I spent all day Friday at

UNO, trying to determine what else I needed to do to graduate from my graduate program, and on the way home I stopped at the new community center, where Joe's Cozy Corner used to be, after school services for kids and assistance for women experiencing domestic violence. A friend of mine, also part of the INCITE! Chapter, stopped by to see how we could support this work.

Up to that point, how they had been reporting it on the news made it seem like it wasn't a threat to New Orleans. So it caught many people off guard...

JD: Yeah, that is what everyone says, I know we went to a movie Friday night and I had a meeting on Saturday, we went out to eat for lunch, and then, within an hour we had decided to leave, packed up and went...

SG: On Saturday, we were at garage sales. We went to the Farmer's Market. We bought stuff, and then we got home and said "oh shit!" the hurricane is headed this way. I talked to my mom, and we knew we were going to leave.

So it wasn't an issue of not leaving, it was how we would leave, when to leave, and how we would check in with other people to see what they would do. There was no preparation time. My mom left on Saturday with my son. We went to the grocery store and about half the people were staying, and half were leaving, but everyone was stocking up.

Saturday night, watching the news, Mayor Ray Nagin said that if he had the authority to issue a mandatory evacuation he would. He had heard from many meteorologists that the storm would topple the levee system, and he said those in low-lying parishes and low-lying areas in Orleans should leave. Governor Blanco said to pack as if you were going on a camping trip, which wasn't very culturally sensitive, because many people in Orleans have never been on a camping trip.

Mayor Nagin asked that those with the resources in the Lower 9th Ward and New Orleans East should evacuate. It was interesting to listen to the language — nothing about those without resources evacuating, nothing about how they would get out. And at first the Superdome was a shelter of last resort for those with special needs.

On Sunday morning there was a feeling I'd never experienced in the city. Everyone was running around, getting gas. There were these people who I think were homeless, and I had never seen such sadness in my life. They were just watching people get gas, and they were just standing there. Their faces seemed to say "What about us?"

Looking at them, I started to cry. I thought about the work that I used to do coming up, and people being left behind, wondering if I would see these people again, thinking that we would be back in a few days.

After we'd been on the road for an hour, the mayor announced a mandatory evacuation of the city. He had found somewhere in the city charter something that provided him the authority to issue a mandatory evacuation. It was the first time it had ever been done in the city.

When he was doing this, he identified ten shelters, including the Superdome, but there was also a shelter in the Lower 9th Ward area and the New Orleans East area. It was interesting because these were areas that he had already identified as low-lying areas. And he kept on saying the levees would be toppled. I had written down all the shelters, because I was going to be on the Y's crisis line that night, and I wanted to tell women in crisis where to go. My mother and son had gone to Texas, but we evacuated — 11 of us — to a friend's parent's house in Western Louisiana.

I was afraid to go to sleep, because I didn't know what the city was going to look like when I woke up. I remember waking up and hearing that the roof to the Superdome had just been ripped off. And I just started to cry, because I thought it was just a death-trap. Of course this was all sensationalized, only part of the roof had come off.

And the worst thing I could have done was call my mom; I couldn't even talk, and here is her baby daughter talking about how many people had died. She was telling me to calm down, that she couldn't hear what I was saying. I shouldn't have called my mom in tears. And she put the TV on, and I told her that I would call when I pulled myself together. And I started calling my friends to see where they were and to make sure they were safe. They kept on using this phrase — "structural failure" — to describe different parts of the city. New Orleans didn't get a direct hit, which we were all glad about, but there was a lot of damage. As Monday went on, you started to hear reports about water, and by the next day 80% of the city was underwater and you just wondered "what the hell happened?"

That is when the reality was starting to set in. And then they were telling people still in the city to get out and I was just yelling at the TV — how would they get out if they didn't have the money or resources to get out before? There was no plan to get people out of the city. There was so much going on, and I thought I had everyone accounted for, and then I realized there were 50 other people who I didn't know where the hell they were.

I just remember being angry at the TV, being angry at the focus on those who were looting. And who you saw were mostly women of color, specifically Black women with children, older people, people with disabilities — this was who was left, this was who was visible. Poverty became a "Black Marker." But where were the white people, where were the other people in the city?

JD: And if you will remember the first night, you saw white folks — I think some were tourists — lined up to go into the Superdome, and after that you didn't see them very much. A few at the Convention Center.

SG: Yeah, what happened to the white people? You also didn't see anyone from the Vietnamese community, and there is a large Vietnamese community in New Orleans. And there are many Hondurans living in my neighborhood, documented and undocumented, but you didn't see them. Some communities were completely invisible.

So it became completely marginalized, and the image was of savage Black people. And the feeling was: why should we rescue these people? These people who are criminals, who are looting, who are raping, who are killing? The spin — it was the most awful thing I'd ever seen. And I felt like I couldn't watch the TV, but I also couldn't remove myself from the TV. But the only way I felt I could challenge it, was to watch it and try to be informed of what was going on.

It was the most isolating experience — I was in rural Louisiana, with 10 other evacuees, but I was the only one really from New Orleans, and I was the only Black person. And it was very difficult; West Louisiana isn't exactly the best place for a person in an interracial relationship to be. It was scary shit. I wanted to be with people who, if not my family, had similar experiences to me.

JD: I think many people who had evacuated were feeling hopeless and very isolated during that time. I was screaming at the TV, too.

SG: And where was the public outcry? I was thinking, this is insane! Kai, of Critical Resistance, called me and said "We need to do something! Maybe we should organize 'Freedom Buses' and go get people!" And I was thinking, that is a great idea -- but it won't work!

The reality was, the government was failing the people, and I was not surprised about that, specifically the community they were failing... But a lot of groups that identify themselves as progressive, radicals, revolutionaries, leftist, or what have you -- we do not have the capacity to mobilize people, to rescue people and to provide relief.

Yeah, we should have organized Freedom Buses, but how are we going to get the buses, how are we going to get into the city?

I started to think about activism and organizing in an imperialist nation, and how we all have the analysis but we also lack the resources and the people power to effectively move. It was a wake-up -- imperialism is real, and being in an oppressed community in a country like the United States, there is a level of comfort that we organizers and activists have, and that comfort — in terms of an imperialist privilege — prevents us from connecting with people so that we can effectively mobilize the resources we do have, not just to critique the government but to challenge the government in meeting the needs of the people in ways that are not met by traditional social service models.

JD: You are illustrating not just the lack of response of the government, but the weakness of the left and our response to Katrina. People are outraged, but we — the left — are not any stronger, we don't have any more capacity than we did on August 28th. But I think there is huge organizing potential in this moment, even though the task ahead of us is incredible. You've been in post-Katrina New Orleans, but you've also been in Philadelphia and other parts of the country. What has the progressive response been to in your estimation? And what potential is there for organizing? And what needs to be done to build this movement?

SG: I think those are very good questions. One of the things I've been thinking about is this statement the co-founder of INCITE!, Andrea Smith from the Cherokee Nation, made in 2000 at the first Color of Violence Conference at UC Santa Cruz — and I'm paraphrasing here — that there is a lot working against us, but the things we do have are numbers, we have the people, and if we aren't reaching out to people, organizing people from the grassroots, then we will always be stopped; we will always be beat.

We need to look at our work this way post-Katrina. There is a lot working against us, but there are so many resources that we have not acknowledged or tapped into, and that is the power of the people. And I'm not talking about people in an abstract way, because people have resources and skills and experiences that we have to identify and pull together.

So when we talk about post-Katrina organizing, we are talking again about building an unfragmented, an undivided movement. To build this we have to put all our own agendas aside and look to the people most adversely impacted, and that is the challenge. You see everyone grab, grab, grab for a piece saying "we are activists, we are organizers and we can do blah, blah, blah." But it isn't an individual thing — it is not "what can I do," but "what can we do" — it requires collective action. If there is one thing I've learned in INCITE! it is to create a pole for collective action, because it is not just about us.

There has been a lot learned from natural disasters, around the world, but not all this information has been shared:

natural disasters, human conflicts, mandmade disasters that we should have all learned from. Haiti was nearly destroyed a year ago from a hurricane. Where are the left and progressive forces learning from that experience? If anything, for me, advocating for a grassroots response, stepping into the reality of it, I'm thinking: how do we create a more global awareness, how do we connect local to global? How do we see ourselves as a global society? As a Black person, this has made me more aware of being connected to a Black diaspora. Even when George Bush came down, he talked about "this part of the world" to distance himself from citizens of this country.

JD: Well, don't you think that fit in with the media discussion of refugees, to somehow "otherize" people from New Orleans to make them seem like they were from somewhere else?

SG: Yeah, but part of that was about how we view refugees in this country. Refugee is equated with something so negative, something so wrong, so "not us." So are the people they are seeing on TV so wrong, so not like us? I'm not advocating that people from the Gulf Coast are refugees; I don't think that is the most appropriate term. But I also don't think there is anything wrong with being a refugee, yet the media spin on it is so negative. And even Black leaders shouting "I am not a refugee!" — like it is such a bad thing. But when I saw the images of suffering in New Orleans, you could not deny that there are third world realities in the United States — and we need to connect with people around the world.

JD: I wanted you to expand more on the diaspora. It seems that many people in the United States make the assumption that folks from New Orleans just have to stay where they landed. Some — like Barbara Bush — even say that "they were underprivileged anyway, so this has worked out well for them." What does it mean to advocate for the right of return?

SG: What I was talking about earlier, about the social and economic isolation of where I grew up — that there were many social ills — but it was still a community. And when I think about New Orleans, I think about the over-incarceration, the inadequate schooling, the labor exploitation, the high level of violence against women, the sex industry that exists in the city, the housing crisis, unemployment, lack of HIV outreach and education — I mean there is so much shit — it is a very oppressive environment to live in.

But it is also one of the strongest communities to live in. That people can be denied to return to their communities of origin, city of origin — and I'm not advocating that New Orleans wasn't oppressive — but if you say someone is "underprivileged" you have to ask: Why was that allowed to occur?

People didn't just walk away. They were forcibly removed. And many didn't know where they were going. And they are just expected to start over? How can you just start over when your safety net has been destroyed? Your family, your friends, your neighbors, your church, your schools are gone?

I'm not saying that people haven't been displaced around the world — they have. But to not acknowledge the trauma that they have suffered and endured after Katrina, the stress of worrying about other family members, and having to retrieve bodies and things like that. My own child has no desire to be back in New Orleans — I think it will change — but he's afraid of hurricanes. What impact has this had on children who waited on their rooftops or waded through the water?

What impact does it have to watch your mother die, and you have to roll your mother around in wheelchair? The desperation — what are you doing to us? Why aren't you here? While there are cameras and reporters in your face, but no help is on the way?

And the culture shock! New Orleans is more of a Caribbean city than a city in the South, or any other city in this country. It is a completely different culture. And there is just this expectation that you will adjust quickly.

For those who want to return, they should not just have the right to return, but it should be qualified — they have the right to return to safe, clean environment with the resources to thrive. We need to be talking about sustainable human development. People have the right to return to a city that has quality affordable housing, and schools with the supplies they need to educate our kids.

It makes me think — if someone is hungry, and you give them food, it isn't necessarily what they need. And then you say, "You should be thankful, I just gave you this." And then it becomes a slap in the face. But there is the assumption that the communities where people have landed have met their needs, and that isn't true.

JD: Yeah, that is why the task ahead of us is so daunting, in terms of building a movement for the right of return and self-determination. I run into my neighbors, just back in town, and they say "Nagin told us to come back, but what are we coming back to? We have no electricity in my neighborhood, no infrastructure in our city, so I'm going back to where I was, because I can't live like this."

SG: Yeah, and even if people want to return: where will they stay? There is no affordable housing! And if you don't

return, you don't get any say in how the city is rebuilt, it will just keep moving along.

But if you go to New Orleans, there is life there. People are returning, people are rebuilding. And it is home. People want to go home. A damage has been done. Do we walk away, or restore?

My own personal story is that the house I lived in was destroyed; it got seven feet of water — there was damage from the top and the bottom. My mom's house in the 9th Ward got five feet of water, water sat in the house for weeks. I have a brother with a house in New Orleans East, which was completely destroyed. I have a sister in Mid-City; her roof was torn off and she got five feet of water, there was mold all the way to the ceiling.

My twin brother lived in an apartment complex, he lived on the third floor — he didn't receive any floodwater, but there was water on the first floor, so he had to move. He was living part time in New Orleans and part time in Oakland, so he just returned to Oakland. And I will return the third week of December, but I will be returning home without any family. None of my family can live in the city.

JD: Wow! And yours is just an example of one family — there are so many more stories like that. And in a way these circumstances are really forcing us to build the movement that you described before, an unfractured or undivided movement, cause there is really no way to divide all these complex issues.

SG: And it is something we've never done before, certainly not on such a large scale. And that is what attracted me to work with the People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition.

If we are going to be organizing people to make demands, if we are going to be involved in the relief and reconstruction of New Orleans, it requires the rethinking and rebuilding of communities. How can we do that? And I think the workgroups and structure of the Coalition reflect that.

You can't rebuild a community without education. You can't rebuild a community without economic justice. You can't rebuild a community without environmental health and justice. You can't rebuild a community without safety and community accountability as it relates to the criminal justice system and violence against women. You can't rebuild a community without healthcare. You can't make demands without political oversight by the people.

Those are the ingredients needed for a community. And I just think that holistic approach by this coalition reflects that. Now, is it easy? No! -- because it has not been done before. It is going to be a challenge moving forward, but this is the only thing -- the only coalition that is taking this holistic approach and building it from the grassroots.

One of the things you haven't seen written about Katrina — though you are starting to see it now — is about violence against women, and the gender and racial face of poverty. When the news media was called out that Friday after the storm, by the Black Congressional Caucus and Kanye West, they began to shift and talk about looting less and poverty and Black people's poverty. A few days later, they dropped the racial issue of poverty, and only focused on poverty -- which just reminds us how difficult it is for people in this country to talk about racism and white supremacy.

But there was no discussion — no mainstream media coverage — of the gender impact of Katrina — no feminist perspective out there. It just became convenient to talk about poverty, and not the gender and racial face of it.

I've been pushing for analysis within the People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition, and INCITE! locally and nationally has been organizing around this. One of the co-founders of INCITE! New Orleans, Janelle White, wrote a statement connecting the personal and political. And Loretta Ross from SisterSong, a women of color reproductive rights organization, wrote a statement "A Feminist Perspective of Hurricane Katrina" just acknowledging the violence women have experienced, and how the aftermath and response just perpetuated that violence.

To go back to anti-racism and anti-violence organizing — the immediate response from NOPD (New Orleans Police Department) about the rapes was that they had no reports of it. Rape and sexual assault are the most underreported crimes in this country! And to deny it, just creates this environment of violence — you cannot even stop it.

One of the ways to control people is through rape, through sexual assault. And for women of color, there is also the choice you have to make, when you report rape to the police, to question how this contributes to the overpolicing of your community. And if you are an undocumented women, you have to question how does it contribute to your partner or your being deported? And for transgendered people, there is always the fear that you won't be believed.

JD: And the current ratio of men to women in the city is something like 5:1 — due to construction workers etc. — so in addition to what you've said, what do you think the challenges women face post-Katrina?

SG: I wanted to talk about that — not only has there been a huge racial shift in the city, there has also been a gender shift. This makes New Orleans a dangerous place for women, not only because there are more men than women, but because services for women are not in the city right now.

The YWCA was the main place survivors of sexual assault could go. The "Y" had a rape crisis program for, I

believe, the last 25 years. The “Y” will not be reopening, because the building was destroyed. There is no other organization providing that service in the city of New Orleans; and most other domestic violence programs have either relocated to Baton Rouge, or have shut down.

What will the post-Katrina organizing response be to ensure that it is safe for women to return to their community? And also, who will be providing services for the needs of survivors of sexual assault, who have been re-victimized during Katrina, and now want to return home?

That also brings up one of the most difficult things for me. Being in the city with few children, which is mostly male and where most people there don't give a shit about you or the city. Most men there are cleaning up, doing construction, FEMA workers.

It is really hard to reclaim and rebuild your city when the people who care about it are not there. And I can't speak enough about my concern about the whitening of New Orleans. A city that was nearly 70% Black is now more like 10%. And this all goes back to the injustice you saw in New Orleans before Katrina — it has made it so much easier for these demographic shifts to occur.

I call it inequality by design. It is not surprising, but it becomes so surreal when you can actually see the reality of it.

JD: It is almost as if it has happened at such a hyper-speed — it was always happening before, but the rapidness with which it happened, it is almost difficult to wrap your mind around it.

SG: It just begs the question: Who is the city for? It seems by design that Black people were pushed out and Brown people — Latino immigrants — were brought in. You've created this situation where Black people and Brown people are fighting for jobs. But what many Black people don't see is the condition under which Brown people are working. This is another reason we need to build an undivided movement.

In terms of organizing, INCITE! wants to support a community-based health clinic, with a women's center component. We also want to establish a child-care co-op for returning families. We have to rethink our organizing strategy... I do believe in the possibility that we can save the things that were good about the city and change the things that were not.