

## OUR VIEW

# Lesson Learned

Natural disasters have a way of putting us all on the same playing field, reminding us that no matter our station in life, no matter how much money we have, no matter who answers to us or who we answer to, that we're all in this thing called life, on this place called Earth, together.

Many of us are tempted to believe we are in the "end times," though no one can say for sure, because religious texts generally don't pinpoint when life as we know it will cease to exist. We're sure the victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake thought the world was coming to an end. Years after the devastating tragedy, the human cost still doesn't seem real: a worldwide death toll of 186,983 an estimated 42,883 missing. It was the ninth deadliest natural disaster in modern history.

We're sure the victims of Hurricane Andrew experienced a sense of déjà vu, that this was their time. The 1992 storm, the second most destructive in U.S. history, caused 65 deaths and \$38.1 billion in damage (mostly in Florida) and was the nation's costliest nature disaster until Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on Louisiana and Mississippi in 2005. Watching Katrina's aftermath on television, it was hard not to think that New Orleans was through, that this quintessentially un-American city—a gumbo's stew of cultures—would now be a historical footnote. At \$81.2 billion in damages, Katrina was the costliest natural disaster and the deadliest—1,836 lives lost. (The previous high: 1,200 deaths in the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane, which struck the Leeward Islands, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas and Florida.)

Now we have the 2007 Southern California fires stoked by the Santa Ana winds. Evacuees have described the city of San Diego as an inferno, driving through it like driving through Hell. Fewer people have died (one) than the 22 fatalities from a 2003 fire of similar magnitude. But that's of little solace to the millions of San Diego County and Southern California residents uprooted by six major blazes that, as of Wednesday evening, had destroyed more than 1,500 homes and burned nearly 674 square miles, from Ventura all the way to Mexico. Damage estimates in San Diego County alone top \$1 billion.

In a press conference, Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff said the bungled response to Katrina provided some lessons on approaching this disaster. "First of all, planning and preparation in advance for these kinds of challenges, so that we have worked together and planned together with the Defense Department and with state authorities well in advance of the crisis. That's been a big help here. Second, we have really flooded the zone as quickly as possible by staging assets to deal both with the firefighting issue and with the response issue."

From an operational standpoint, Chertoff's comments sound good. The government is learning from its mistakes. From a social standpoint, they ring hollow. There will be comparisons of the government's handling of Katrina and the 2007 wildfires. There will be second-guessing and sniping: Katrina was backburned, while Southern California was given priority. (To be fair, some have complained that the government didn't act quickly enough to save homes from the fires.) Those arguments miss this vital point: that disasters put us all on the same playing field. Rich or poor. Black, Hispanic, Caucasian, Asian-American, Irish, Italian, Iranian, African, Australian, etc.—it doesn't matter. CEO or janitor. Preacher or pimp. Thug or thespian. Gay or straight. Democrat or Republican. Tragedy binds us in the human experience. We can empathize with the poor New Orleans residents who lost generations-old, marginally valued homes in crime-riddled neighborhoods because, no matter how bad things are, home is home. For the same reason, we can also empathize with millionaires whose homes have gone up in flames. Or the villagers forced to flee an erupting volcano. Or... Since we can't count on our federal government to be our savior in times of peril—nor should we—we must count on ourselves, on our humanity.

You may glean spiritual undertones in this editorial, which is fine. If that means you'll offer whatever help you can—money, phone calls, donations, prayers—to disaster victims, then the lesson will have sunk in.



## What are we leaving behind?

By James Clingman  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Muhammad Nasserdeen, another warrior for economic freedom for Black people, succumbed on October 11. Brother Nasserdeen was the founder of Recycling Black Dollars in Los Angeles.

News of his death was yet another realization of what everyone already knows: We all have to leave here one day. Nasserdeen's transition was eerily similar to our brother, Ken Bridges, co-founder of the MATAH Network.

Those two brothers knew and supported each other, and they worked on the same issues: Black economic empowerment. Both died on October 11 and both were 53 years old (Nasserdeen was one month away from his 53rd birthday).

More importantly, these brothers "died on their way to freedom, but at least they were on their way."

Brother Nasserdeen had worked for the empowerment and economic freedom of Black people, not only in L.A. but all across this country. His philosophy and practice of recycling Black dollars will live on, and it is up to us to continue his legacy by doing what he espoused.

After the celebration of his life, after our grieving, after the much-deserved plaudits and accolades, and



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after the shock has subsided, we must continue to move forward, to press toward the goal that Nasserdeen set, for himself, and for all of us. We must take up the gauntlet he threw down via his work and dedication to Black economic empowerment and do the things necessary to bring us to that place called "true freedom."

As I said during my speech at the Bring Back Black convention, just after I heard about Brother Muhammad's death, "We are leaving here, but what are we leaving here?"

We can see what Nasserdeen left; we can see what Ken Bridges left; we can see what other brothers and sisters left. The most important question for each of us is: What will I leave here when I leave here?

There will be a tremendous outpouring of condolences and remembrances for Muhammad Nasserdeen. Go to the website [www.rbdmedia.net](http://www.rbdmedia.net) and see

all of the comments and the beautiful online memorial; listen to the inspiring music as well.

And then take a moment to think about yourself. Take some time out to reflect on your life and your legacy. You know, it's funny how we come to grips with the reality of death when one of our friends or family members dies or when someone famous dies. We get real uncomfortable — for a little while — and then we return to business as usual, having changed nothing.

Let's allow Brother Nasserdeen's life, rather than his death, to lift us up to higher heights in our resolve and follow through on the things we must do to empower ourselves and leave an economic legacy here for children. Do what he and others have admonished us to do for years.

Buy Black as much as you

can. Recycle your Black dollars. Start more businesses that can grow and create jobs for our young people. Pool your resources, locally and nationally; invest in one another, support one another, and assist Black organizations and causes.

It's all about the doing, folks. Nasserdeen demonstrated that in his life. I am sure he had some periods during his efforts to help Black people, as many of us have, when he questioned himself and maybe even wanted to quit. But he kept on going, through the good and bad times, to do the work he was called to do.

Now that he is gone physically, will his work continue? That's up to us, of course. Not only should his work be continued, it should be raised to an even higher level. Are you ready?

I did not know Brother  
(See Clingman, Page 9)

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