

KATRINA - TEN YEARS AFTER

Ronald is part of our Ready, Willing & Able administrative office cleaning crew, so I see him on a regular basis. Usually it's in the late afternoon either before he starts work, when he's sitting quietly at one of the tables in the "Café," headphones on, building key fob hanging proudly from the lariat around his neck, or when he's started cleaning, headphones tucked under his baseball cap, portable vacuum strung from his shoulder like a Gibson guitar. Ronald moved into Gordon Street shortly after arriving at our door, then a couple of years ago got himself an apartment through Advocates. I'm guessing he's mid-fifties, his slicked jet black hair combined with his smooth, slightly olive tinged skin makes it a tough number to pin down.

The media coverage of the 10th anniversary of Katrina reminded me of a meteor crossing the night sky. You looked up, it held your attention for a moment, then quickly departed. I admit the only visual I found unsettling was the picture of the man in charge of a Government at the time dancing with an elderly African-American woman in New Orleans. So I constructed a lyric to make peace with the image "Perhaps it is a dance we do in sorrow, perhaps it is a dance we do in silence."

Revis is a different story. Reclusive and, at times elusive, he rarely leaves his Second Street apartment. I look for him walking down Waverly Street heading to or from one of the convenience stores that populate the area near his apartment. Last time I saw him was a couple of months ago. His hair, under the watch cap he always wears, his skin a chalky gray. A quiet and reserved presence. I asked how his health was, was he taking his medicine, eating OK? His life OK? He asked me how Darlene was, he'd been meaning to stop by and see everyone. Then the conversation switches gears as it always does. "How's your friend, you know, the skinny white guy with black hair?" Revis has never forgotten being the recipient of a singular act of kindness. Shortly after he arrived here he asked Darlene if there was any way she could help him get a TV so he could watch the football games on Thanksgiving Day. Darlene mentioned it to

me, I called one of our Board members, Jim, who not only got him a TV, but also personally delivered it to Revis' apartment.

"Well Revis, he's still skinny, but just like and me, his hair is no longer black." We share a laugh, shake hands, I tell him to call me if there is anything we can do.

SMOC's involvement with Katrina can best be understood through excerpts from a series of communications between a senior housing manager in Governor Romney's administration and myself in the storm's aftermath. The conversations usually occurring on Sunday afternoon, Mark at Otis Air Force Base on the Cape and me at home.

Mark. "Jim, the Governor authorized the use of Otis to temporarily house refugees. They're flying them in tomorrow. I wonder if you could help, I'm setting up a task force. Could you assign a staff member."

Me. "Of course Mark. I'll talk with Darlene. We'll be a part of it."

Mark. "Jim, we mostly got families here, but there's a whole bunch of single adults. You know they may have just swept them off the streets. Some of them seem confused. I don't think they told them where they were going."

"Jim, we've got a number of agencies stepping forward to help re-house the families, but no one stepping forward with the single adults. Do you have enough units to help us?"

Me. "We'll find them Mark. Darlene's a pro. How do you want to get them up here from the Cape. What about a bus. That way folks can visit and see where they'd be living?"

Me. "Hey Darlene, I'm arranging a bus trip for you. It'll be fun."

Mark. (one particular Sunday afternoon)

"Jim, we've got a problem here with one of the guys. He's causing problems and some of the families are scared of him. Could you get him into a room today? I can get him to Framingham."

I start thinking 73 Hollis Street.

Me. "Yeah, I think so Mark, if not, we'll put him in a shelter and then find a plan for him tomorrow."

An hour later.

"Mark, bring him to 73 Hollis Street in Framingham. Do you need directions? Jeff will meet him there and get him settled in. He'll also give him some money so he can buy supper."

I hope I've communicated respect and admiration for the job Mark did during that period. He's a class act.

I've never spoken to either Revis or Ronald about their lives in New Orleans, their experiences during the storm, their air flight to Otis or their relocation to Framingham. They've never felt the need to share those life experiences with me.

Our conversations always begin with "Hey Ronald, Hey Revis, it's good to see you. How are you today?"

Katrina was a natural disaster that morphed into a man-made catastrophe. It calls for an anthem taken from a different time.

"Tax the rich, feed the poor
'til there are no rich no more."*

If I try hard enough I can hear the guitars in harmony on the track as Alvin Lee's soulful voice soars above them.

"I'd love to change the world, but I don't know what to do so I'll leave it up to you."*

I do know how to greet the Ronalds of this world with respect.

I do remember to look for Revis as I drive down Waverly Street nearly every day on my way to Roche Bros.

I think I've helped the agency create safe and respectful housing for a few single adults caught in the maelstrom of our current times.

Amen.

Jim Cuddy
September, 2015

***Lyrics from:**

"I'd Love to Change the World. Written by Alvin Lee. 1971 A Space in Time. Ten Years After

NOTE: Ten Years After achieved brief, widespread popularity after their performance at Woodstock. They were featured on both the film and album. Ironically, their rendition of "I'm Going Home" was featured.