



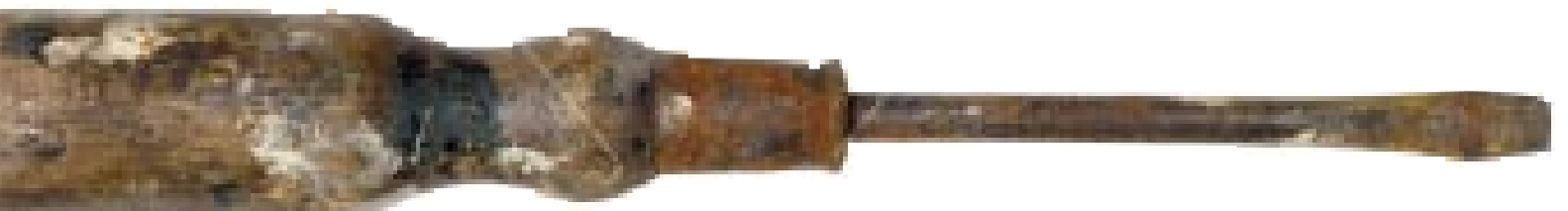
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# MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST MAIN STREETS: POST KATRINA

BY STACY PAIR MISSISSIPPI MAIN STREET





(top) Emeril Lagasse at the grand opening of Emeril's Gulf Coast Fish House, located in the Main Street district of Gulfport, Miss.

(bottom) Jimmy Buffet at the announcement of the Margaritaville Casino Resort to be located in Biloxi, Miss.

**BAM!** The signature exclamation of world class chef, Emeril Lagasse, rings out in the Main Street district of Katrina-devastated downtown Gulfport, Mississippi. Emeril's Gulf Coast Fish House opened in the Island View Hotel and Casino on June 22, 2007. The new upscale, boutique casino resort is located in Gulfport's Main Street District.

When I spoke with Mr. Lagasse the weekend the restaurant opened, he said he was pleased to be able to support the recovery of the Mississippi Gulf coast and Gulfport's historic downtown in particular. This is his first new restaurant project since 2003, but he and his wife felt strongly about investing in Mississippi's recovery. That is great faith coming from a man who could choose to locate a franchise of his namesake anywhere in the world.

PR Newswire quotes Mr. Lagasse as saying, "Opening a restaurant at the Island View is particularly special to me because my family and I have very close ties to the Gulf Coast. My wife, Alden, grew up in Gulfport and we have spent a lot of time with our family and friends in this area. I am also very happy to be working with local guys Rick (Carter) and Terry (Green) at the Island View. I hope that this restaurant is a small step toward the recovery of this region and brings new attention to its unique food culture, abundant fresh seafood, game, and produce."

Mr. Lagasse's style of taking

home-style southern comfort food and elevating it to five-star haute cuisine is a fitting homage to what is happening in the Main Street districts along Mississippi's Gulf Coast. After all, how many Main Street districts in communities of 50,000 to 75,000 can boast restaurants by such luminaries as Emeril Lagasse and Todd English or have a Ruth's Chris Steak House *and* a Hard Rock Café in the heart of their historic downtowns?

Well, along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, that is exactly what is occurring. The most incredible transformations are taking place. As the region struggles to recover, these communities are looking at becoming not only whole again, but bigger and better. And, in the thick of this recovery and rebuilding are our Mississippi Gulf Coast Main Street organizations and program managers.

### THE FIRST DAYS

On August 29, 2005, even before the wind died down from Katrina's ferocious onslaught, the Main Street programs along the Mississippi Gulf Coast were already functioning as triage units for the wounded municipalities. Because Main Street is so often the only place that all city, county, and community organizations sit at the same table, Main Street programs were the logical places to begin organizing and recruiting local citizens in search and recovery efforts.

Beginning in the first days after the storm, local Main Street managers sought out and contacted merchants, volunteers, and board members to find out who was safe and who needed assistance. Next, the Mississippi Gulf Coast Association became the point of contact for supplies, volunteers, and citizens trying to locate neighbors and friends.

As trucks rolled in from all over the nation, the Main Street managers were often the people coordinating and directing where they should go and identifying those who needed help.

In Ocean Springs, Mississippi, Main Street Manager Margaret Miller lost her home and was actually living in her office along with her husband, teenage son, and a golden retriever. However, this circumstance did not stop her from

program managers have remained in the forefront of what is happening. As \$150 million became available for community revitalization projects and another \$15 million for community planning through the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG), the Main Street managers coordinated the CDBG requests and applications. And in some cases, they became the conduit for dispersing those funds.

**Emeril Lagasse with Rick Carter, owner of the Island View Hotel and Casino Resort in Gulfport, Miss.**



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going right to work, assessing damage in the downtown and trying to contact merchants and committee members. She worked very closely with Ocean Springs Mayor Connie Moran in assessing damage and making connections with recovery offices.

When the governor began organizing the Mississippi Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal, Miller was one of the first people asked to serve on the committee that would evaluate loss and oversee recovery of nonprofit organizations, historic districts, and tourist sites. She continues to serve on that committee now that the rebuilding phase has begun.

### GULFPORT DIRECTING DOWNTOWN'S RECOVERY

As recovery efforts continued and rebuilding efforts began in earnest, these Main Street

In the case of Gulfport, Main Street Manager Lisa Bradley coordinated information with several organizations and city offices and wrote the requests for some \$12 million in recovery funds to be used solely in the downtown. These funds were approved and will be dispersed through the Gulfport Main Street Association office.

The two biggest projects Gulfport will be undertaking are a \$7 million boulevard improvement project, which will restore and enhance the main corridor that runs through the Main Street district to the Gulfport Mississippi Harbor, and a multi-million dollar façade grant project that could be precedent-setting in scope.

The boulevard project is of utmost importance as the Highway 49 corridor running through downtown Gulfport to Beach Boulevard is considered the primary gateway to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Across Beach Boulevard is the Gulfport

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Harbor, which is also undergoing a multi-million dollar restoration and enhancement project. Tying the Gulfport Main Street district to the newly developed harbor will be a key project for the City of Gulfport and the Gulfport Main Street Association.

**Biloxi, Miss., Mayor A.J. Holloway (in white) and Hard Rock Casino General Manager Joe Billheimer prepare to smash their guitars, signaling the opening of the facility.**



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The Gulfport Main Street façade grant program is unique in that it will work on entire blocks of façades at one time with one architect and one group of contractors working directly with Main Street Manager Bradley and her design committee chairperson. The design committee chair, Johnny Olsen, with the Guild Hardy architectural firm, will act as project manager for the entire façade grant program.

The property owners will sign an easement giving the City of Gulfport rights to their property during the period of renovation. The owners will also sign a contract agreeing not to change the appearance of the building façades for a certain period of time.

The parameters of the program will allow the Gulfport Main Street Association to administer the façade grants through and for the city. This,

in turn, allows the program manager to make certain that the architectural design and character are accurate as well as consistent throughout the entire downtown during the recovery and renovation process.

Gulfport's reinvestment dollars very quickly surpassed the \$150 million mark. The Island View Hotel and Casino made an initial investment of \$45 million even before Emeril's Gulf Coast Fish House opened – and the casino is currently in its second phase of redevelopment. Also, the Hancock Bank, a regional banking institution, is reinvesting \$50 million in its headquarters building in the Main Street district, so it is easy to see how fast and furiously Gulfport development activity is moving!



## BILOXI

### BECKONING THE FUTURE

Next, picture if you will, Kid Rock and Cindy Crawford, along with other celebrities, standing shoulder to shoulder with the mayor and other dignitaries of a community as they get ready to smash the ceremonial guitars, signaling the opening of a new Hard Rock Casino and Resort Hotel. In Las Vegas? No. This is happening in the Main Street district of Biloxi, Mississippi. How, you may ask, does an upscale gambling establishment such as Hard Rock coexist with a historic downtown district? The answer is very, very well.

The now iconic Biloxi Lighthouse stands as a beacon beckoning the fusion of new development alongside the historic district. The lighthouse is one of the few historic properties along the Mississippi Gulf Coast to be spared by Hurricane Katrina. It has become a symbol of hope and

defiance for coast residents. The lighthouse was recently selected as the new emblem for the 2008 Mississippi car license plate. It will replace the longstanding magnolia.

What has been happening within the historic Main Street district as the new upscale casinos have opened across Beach Boulevard is an infusion of new development in several vacant historic buildings. An example of this would be The Bank. This is a new blues club that will open in a renovated historic building that once housed a Regions Bank. The venue will offer cool blues and good, casual food. The attraction of being located across Beach Boulevard from the Hard Rock as well as the Beau Rivage Resort is one that has a great deal of allure for developers.

Biloxi Main Street Association is also taking advantage of the opportunity to make improvements as they go, such as period lighting, underground wiring, and WiFi hotspots. All of these improvements can be included in the recovery funding coming the Community Development Block Grant.

"If we have to build it back," says Biloxi Main Street Manager Kay Miller, "and we do, we may as well build it right."

And then there is Margaritaville. Singer/songwriter (and Pascagoula, Mississippi, native) Jimmy Buffet has announced plans for a \$700 million complex to be located in Biloxi. Although it will be just outside the Biloxi Main Street District, it will certainly affect the community's tourist traffic. With literally billions of dollars of renovation, restoration, and redevelopment going on in and all around Biloxi's Main Street district, the benefits are becoming very clear.



## PASCAGOULA

### 100 HOMES IN 100 DAYS

One of the most prolific stories of the recovery taking place in Mississippi's Gulf Coast Main Street districts is the "100 Homes in 100 Days" project that took place in Pascagoula's Main Street district. When the storm surge from Hurricane Katrina engulfed an entire community of low-to-moderate-income homes located in the Main Street district, it looked as though the close-knit neighborhoods would be lost.

"These are the people who spend lots of time in our downtown," notes Pascagoula Main Street Manager Rebecca Davis. "These are the kids who rode their bikes to school and walked to the store. These are the folks who have been here and have roots in this district. We needed them to stay here."

Rebuilding or renovating 100 hurricane-damaged homes in 100 days sounds like an impossible task, but that is exactly what a coalition of organizations did in Pascagoula. On March 26, 2007, the concentrated effort began, with the goal of returning 100 families to their Pascagoula neighborhood by July. At the project's conclusion, the rapid rebuild template will be given to other groups wishing to do the same in their communities.

"One of the great results of this project," says Davis, "is that we are learning lessons for everyone, hoping that it will be easier for the next group of people who have to go through something like this. We want to share what we have learned with everyone."

Volunteers from more than a dozen organizations began construction on the first 10 houses in the 100 Homes in 100 Days Affordable Housing Initiative after a ribbon

Darlene Sipp's home was flooded with three feet of muddy water when Hurricane Katrina hit her Pascagoula neighborhood. The house was gutted by a church group several months after the storm, but the structure wasn't sound and had to be torn down. The 100 Homes in 100 Days project demolished the house, prepped the site and brought in a modular home.



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cutting and a kickoff ceremony. Five organizations led a coalition effort to renovate and rebuild the homes in 100 calendar days, addressing the biggest issue remaining in the recovery from Katrina, lack of affordable housing.

The American Red Cross, Salvation Army, Mississippi Home Again, Hope Has a Face Foundation, and the Jackson County Community Services Coalition have created a process that focuses on rebuilding entire neighborhoods in a compressed time frame and have invited other organizations to join in. The Salvation Army and the American Red Cross Hurricane Recovery Program have each pledged to fund up to

\$10,000 in material support for each qualified homeowner.

"This project fits right into the work the Hurricane Recovery Program is already doing in the area. We are pleased to be providing case management with other partner agencies for the clients as well as supporting material costs of their homes through our Means to Recovery Program," says Russ Paulsen, executive director of the Hurricane Recovery Program. "This project also represents the incredible partnerships in the nonprofit community that are happening throughout the Gulf Coast. We are pleased to be associated with that effort."

Volunteers from Ameri-

corps, Youthbuild, University of Missouri, and Stanford University joined those housed in local churches and fanned out to sites in a five-block area of inner-city Pascagoula to begin work on renovating homes. The volunteers were joined by contractors who, in addition to acting as renovation managers and supervisors, are preparing to start construction on other parts of the project, including a prototype Green Affordable Home. The home uses a state-of-the-art design that is not only environmentally friendly but is designed to improve the quality of life for its occupants.

The 100 Homes in 100 Days initiative is using a combination of renovations, new modular

houses, and conventionally constructed homes to revitalize an area of Pascagoula that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

"After completion in July, the project's template will be introduced into the public domain so that it can be implemented elsewhere to more rapidly provide a permanent and sustainable affordable housing solution for disaster recovery," explains Keith Canfield, founder of the Hope Has a Face Foundation. Additional support for the project has come from Northrop Grumman, Greenleaf Consulting, and Home Depot.

It can be a challenge to keep going day after day in a

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**"...THE PEOPLE ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST 'HITCHED UP THEIR BRITCHES AND GOT TO WORK.'"**

Darlene Sipp and son watching as their new home is placed where the old one sat.



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Darlene Sipp and her father outside their FEMA trailers in Pascagoula, Miss.

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hurricane ravaged region. One of the favorite quotes of South Mississippians is by Governor Haley Barbour who said in the days after the storm that the people along the Mississippi Gulf Coast “hitched up their britches and got to work.” Anytime people along the Mississippi Gulf Coast feel like stopping or start feeling sorry for ourselves, we just remember that and take pride in what we have accomplished. It spurs us on to try and do more...to reach higher. But, we never EVER forget that there are a lot of other people from all over the country that hitched up their britches’ right along with us. They are still here, helping us.

## AN OUTPOURING OF SUPPORT

The help from nonprofit and faith-based organizations has been incredible. For our Mississippi Gulf Coast Main Street programs, the outpouring of support from other Main Street communities and volunteer organizations has made the difference. It is estimated that at least 500,000 volunteers have come to South Missis-

sippi to date. And they are still coming. When federal agencies were trying to decide how to divide up the red tape, the 501 (c) 3 organizations, national foundations, and churches were already here, cleaning, feeding, building, and supporting the recovery efforts.

Many of these 501 (c) 3 organizations were Main Street programs from other parts of the nation. In the year following Katrina, several of our Mississippi Gulf Coast Main Street programs would not have made it were it not for monetary donations from Main Street organizations around the nation. These donations gave the Gulf Coast programs the financial support they needed to keep the managers employed and the doors open.

As South Mississippi begins to move forward, it is difficult to remember the massive cleanup effort that has taken place. Before Hurricane Katrina, the largest amount of debris ever removed after a national disaster was 25 million cubic tons after Hurricane Andrew in Florida. To date post-Katrina, the Mississippi Gulf Coast has removed al-

most 47 million cubic tons of land debris and has completed about 99 percent of the removal. The marine debris removal has yet to be measured.

## GOING FORWARD

As we segue from the recovery phase and enter the beginning stages of rebuilding, it is significant to look at some of the numbers that show this growth and redevelopment seems to be just beginning. For instance, the population of the Mississippi Gulf Coast before Katrina was 458,000. The population now is 446,000, and school enrollment is at 94 percent of pre-Katrina figures, as all schools reopened within nine weeks of Katrina’s landfall. With eight more casinos slated for development in the next year, those census figures should continue to rise.

Regardless of the fact that 75 percent of all businesses in the area were closed by Katrina, in the 18 months following the storm, actual retail sales had record increases. This is partly due to home repair and replacement of lost goods. However, the sales have declined only slightly from those record numbers (still well above pre-Katrina sales revenue) and are expected to continue a slow rise as the population increases.

With more than half a billion dollars allocated for economic development in South Mississippi, many businesses and retail developers are looking for locations along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This gives those Main Street programs opportunities and leveraging power that probably would not have existed before Katrina.

Perhaps most significant is the fact that in December 2005, 38,000 South Mississippi families were living in FEMA trailers. That number has dropped to 14,000 as housing conditions continue

to improve. This has moved the focus of the survival hierarchy from food, clothing, and shelter back to more family-oriented activities such as attending festivals, shopping downtown, and taking an evening stroll.

While Katrina was the worst natural and cultural disaster in our nation’s history, there are positive things happening in the aftermath. The citizens of South Mississippi grimace every time a new tropical storm develops or a hurricane appears on the radar. But they continue to stalwartly move forward. And, because of the nature of the Main Street committee structure and broad community involvement, the Mississippi Gulf Coast Main Street programs are staying in the forefront of that movement and contributing in very positive ways. ■

*Stacy Pair is a nationally Certified Main Street Manager. Stacy began her Main Street career as the first Main Street manager in Philadelphia, Mississippi. She went on to work for Colonial Williamsburg and was later executive director in the famous Gaffer District in Corning, New York. Stacy moved home to the Mississippi Gulf Coast as a consultant just a few weeks before Hurricane Katrina struck. Since that time she has been involved in the Gulf Coast recovery efforts, working with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Mississippi Heritage Trust as well as serving on the Governor’s Commission for Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal and as chair of the South Mississippi Preservation Task Force. Stacy joined the staff of the Mississippi Main Street Association as Southern District Director in February 2006.*