

TEN YEARS LATER:

# WBENC LOOKS BACK ON HURRICANE KATRINA

TEN YEARS AGO, THE FUTURE OF THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS LOOKED BLEAK. HURRICANE KATRINA, THE

COSTLIEST NATURAL DISASTER IN UNITED STATES HISTORY, MADE LANDFALL ON MONDAY, AUGUST 29, 2005. IN THE NEXT 48 HOURS, THE LEVEES WOULD FAIL AND THE PERSONAL AND BUSINESS LANDSCAPES FOR WOMAN-OWNED BUSINESSES IN THE BIG EASY—including certified and future WBES and staff members of WBC Gulf Coast (now [WBEC South](#))—would change forever.

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## THE DECISION TO EVACUATE

For many people, Hurricane Katrina sounded like a myth. When evacuations happen once or twice every season without consequence, the tendency to trust hurricane warnings wanes. Even naval wife and then-WBC Gulf Coast Director of Certification LaKesha White didn't think, "This could be the big one."

"I was waiting for my husband to come home after a seven-month deployment," says White. "We had a plan in place for evacuation, but I was stubborn. I deviated because he was supposed to be home. I thought my son and I could ride this one out. But my family in Texas pleaded with me, so we went. A normal four-hour drive to Beaumont, Texas took 14 hours."

Although she was already in Birmingham, Alabama on business, Kate Armstrong, the then-Executive

Director of WBC Gulf Coast, couldn't fly or drive home to New Orleans to take any valuables from either her home or the WBC Gulf Coast office, which was located in downtown New Orleans at the time.

"I was lucky that I already was out of the city," says Armstrong, "WBC Gulf Coast had just worked with a Corporate Member to secure Birmingham office space—a cubicle, really—the month before. It was impeccable timing."

One WBE had a plan for Hurricane Katrina, even if she did not know how much it would take to enact.

“Before Katrina, no one really planned,” says Michele Wink, President of [UP Professional Solutions](#). “Evacuation is a pain in the neck. But after Hurricane Ivan in 2004, I knew we needed some kind of plan. It wasn’t very sophisticated; I basically had a phone tree in a folder and a group that would, post Katrina, be called our ‘business continuity team’ now: our CFO, accounting manager, payroll coordinators, and human resource coordinators all at the ready.”

Wink made the call on Saturday afternoon, arranging for hotel rooms in Houston for her team and setting a meet-up time. She left the city at 2:00 a.m. Sunday, her two sons in tow. She remembers thinking she would be back in time to process payroll on Wednesday.

Sentiment can play a part in the decision to evacuate, and a decade later, WBE Teresa Lawrence, President of [Delta Personnel](#), still gets emotional

when she recalls her “typical Cuban American reaction” when she heard about the storm.

“I was like, ‘I’m sure it’s going to blow over!’” says Lawrence. “And my employee looked at me, and she said, ‘Yeah, you are crazy.’ But I still thought it would be like a normal weekend evacuation: Pick up the computers and put them on higher ground. Pack up the kids for three days and go to Jackson, Mississippi.”

“And then, it happened,” says Lawrence.

## WHEN TEMPORARY BECOMES PERMANENT

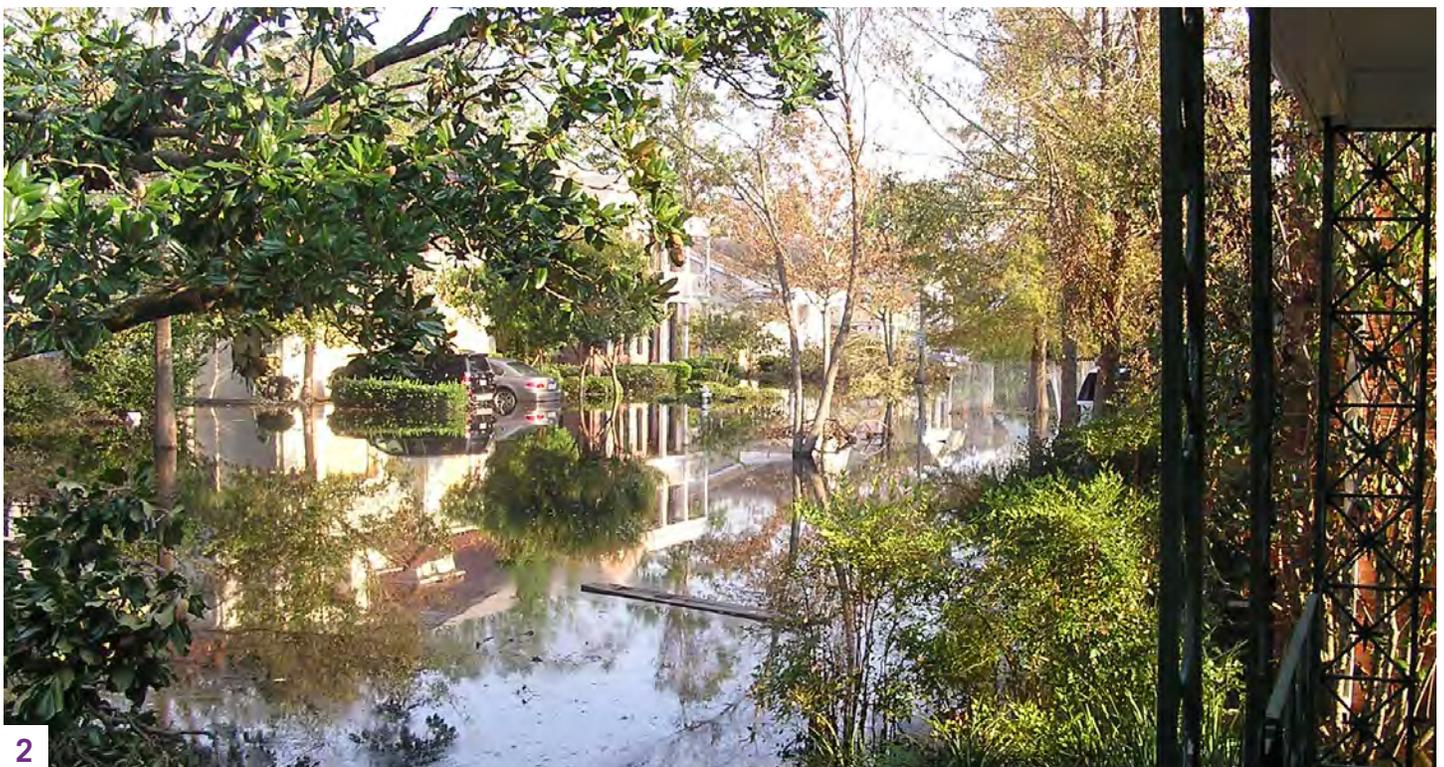
**“[Clients said] ‘We know you’re affected by the storm, but your competition says they can do it faster.’ We had to prove them wrong.”**

Although Hurricane Katrina sideswiped the city, the water rose too far and too fast for the levee system surrounding New Orleans. A tragedy played out on national television as these women started to reorganize their lives and protect their futures.

Wink wasn’t back in New Orleans by Wednesday, but luckily, she had her core team with laptops in Houston, Texas. Due to the outages in the 504 area code, she had to purchase new cell phones for her staff, but Wink says that was a small sacrifice. With 225 employees in 24 states, she had to ensure business resumed as normal.

“We were about one week late processing that first payroll, and there were nervous and worried people,” says Wink. “But time is money. Competitors were champing at the bit. I had clients call me and say ‘We know you’re affected by the storm, but your competition says they can do it faster.’ We had to prove them wrong.”

Busy ensuring employee and client needs were met, Wink says, the company doubled its line of credit. Despite not having a plan for Hurricane





Katrina, her bank worked with her to extend the line of credit and develop options.

Armstrong, who ran the WBC Gulf Coast out of her cubicle in Birmingham during and after the storm, was in communication with her staff and board members when she realized she had to get to the WBC Gulf Coast office in New Orleans to access certification files and other important documents.

“The office was on the 17th floor downtown, and we were told there was unlikely any damage beyond windows being blown out,” says Armstrong. “But the city was under martial law—and there wasn’t any power.”

**“It took diplomacy to explain to people who weren’t affected by the storm that we didn’t have an office. At the same time, we were also dealing with women business owners in the area who lost everything.”**

The city had only cleared business owners and property owners in seven select zip codes to re-enter the city.

“The troops told us we only had two hours to get in the building to get what we needed,” says Armstrong. “I was worried it might take me an hour to just walk the 17 flights of stairs of the building in the dark with no air conditioning! But thankfully, I had brought one of those large, Euro-trip style backpacks. I fit as many of the time-sensitive certification files as I could, the checkbook, and then lugged the CPU tower in my arms.”

As Armstrong returned to Birmingham and continued to field hundreds of inquiries, White remembers trying to process certification applications and help WBC Gulf Coast businesses when she did not have an office or even a working phone.

“The cell phones weren’t working, landlines weren’t working, and this was before smartphones,” says White. “Email wasn’t in the palm of your hand. You couldn’t just send a mass text. It took diplomacy to explain to people who weren’t affected by the storm that we didn’t have an office. At the same time, we were also dealing with women business owners in the area who lost everything.”

**“I started to gear down, to focus on my kids, but my employees were adamant: They couldn’t fix their lives, but they had to do something. We all had to do something—or we’d go crazy.”**

During this time, Lawrence was moving her family, including her mother and grandmother, three kids, and husband, into a decaying apartment in Baton Rouge. With mattresses on the floor and a cooler for a refrigerator, Lawrence thought about throwing in the towel on her business.

“I think a person either gears up or gears down, but your mind works very differently after a disaster,” says Lawrence. “I started to gear down, to focus on my kids, but my employees were adamant: They couldn’t fix their lives, but they had to do something. We all had to do something—or we’d go crazy.”

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Lawrence got a van and took several employees from Baton Rouge to her staffing office in New Orleans, which had been ransacked. The Delta Personnel van, which had been parked outside, was burned to the ground. Inside the office, she confronted tipped computers, payroll checks littering the floor, and even bloodstains. Every 30 minutes, a military patrol came by.

“It was a weird scene, but it was safe—we knew it was important to clean up and establish a routine,” says Lawrence. “We spent those first few weeks just shuttling between the office and the FEMA water and food stations downtown. We drove four hours from Baton Rouge, past all the checkpoints, and just created this little daily routine. It helped.”

For the next two months, every morning, Lawrence would pick up her employees and workers in Baton Rouge and drive them to the Hampton Inn across from the Convention Center in New Orleans. That normalcy helped her move forward, but it also was lonely. When she was invited to the displaced WBC Gulf Coast Christmas party, she reluctantly accepted an invite.

“I didn’t know what WBENC was, and I didn’t have the time, I thought,” says Lawrence. “But I went anyway, and it was overwhelming how many women wanted to help each other. I became

emotional. We understood each other. Our troubles were lesser than other people—people who had lost their loved one, their lives.”

Lawrence was WBENC-Certified three months later, and just this year, she was honored at March’s Summit & Salute as a WBE Star. Yet she remembers that moment in her life as discovering not only a group of tenacious women leaders in the New Orleans community, but also WBEs across the nation who would embrace her upon hearing, “I’m from New Orleans.”

## REBUILDING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Blanca Robinson, who helped grow the Women’s Business Council as Executive Director since 1997, notes that though the RPO was one of the smallest, it has continued to grow and show how “mighty” it is after the storm. No story better defines that than Simone Bruni Crouere, who lost her job in corporate hospitality after the storm, but founded her successful demolition company, [Demo Diva](#), during the recovery from Hurricane Katrina.

Her hot pink excavators are staples of the city redevelopment, and though her story is

inspirational, she credits WBENC-Certification with helping her “learn how to fight with a smile.”

“In the aftermath of a disaster, when you’re trying to build a business, the battlefield is in the mind,” says Crouere. “WBENC has encouraged and cultivated a spirit of support. It’s never been a victim atmosphere. It’s strong women asking how you can be stronger.” **WATCH CROUERE’S TEDX TALK.**

Wink was newly appointed President and CEO of UP Professional Solutions before Hurricane Katrina and hadn’t had enough time in charge of her company to leverage the WBENC community during and after the storm. She has since made up for lost time, attending many local RPO events and even recently winning WBENC South’s 2015 WBE Supplier of the Year Over 10 Million.

“But 10 years later, I can tell you I wish I had been involved immediately,” says Wink. “With WBENC, you never know when someone can lend a hand.”

Wink did end up bringing UP Professional Solutions back to New Orleans, and today she is excited by the dynamic entrepreneurial energy in the city.

“The storm had a silver lining,” says Wink. “A lot of young people came here after the storm, and



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the FEMA money created opportunities. The local universities here have focused on entrepreneurship as well.”

Yet what Wink is most proud of is the expansion of her company’s disaster recovery plan.

“We upgraded from a phone tree to a binder with tabs!” says Wink. “We identified specific roles in each department who are part of the business continuity team. When we hire for that role, the expectation is set that they have to be ready to go when the final decision to leave is made.”

Wink also notes that the plan details seven phases of decision-making to ensure that when that “trigger moment” happens again, there will be a protocol to follow. The process includes preselected evacuation locations based on the type and bearing of a particular hurricane. The last phase includes the requirements for returning to the city and setting up regular business again.

In addition, Wink and other business owners have all moved critical files to the cloud. To run her company, she only needs access to power and a connection to the Internet. Technology, it seems, has made it easier to prepare for the unexpected.

“In the end, no one—not my employees, not my kids—wanted to leave the city,” says Wink. “You can call it pride, or you can call it crazy.”

But many businesses did not return. More than a dozen WBEs had to close, and just as many never returned. Armstrong, for one, never really lived in the city again. She doesn’t want pity for the fact she lost everything in her rental townhome, which flooded. Although she jokes about the fabulous shoes she lost, she is serious about the importance of donating thoughtfully after disasters.

“I was in Birmingham with three outfits to my name,” says Armstrong. “One of my WBENC connections sent me a box of professional clothes and purses, which I was really grateful for. It’s not that people don’t need food and water, but when people lose everything, sometimes it’s the things that make us feel like our old selves that mean the most.”

Robinson returned in 2006 to helm the organization. In 2008, WBC Gulf Coast expanded regionally to include Tennessee, and was renamed WBEC South.

“This anniversary brings with it memories of intense emotions, but also community pride,” says Robinson.

“What was lost was enormous, but without this community, the businesses wouldn’t have stayed.”

“The hardest question we get is: How do we measure the recovery in New Orleans?” says Crouere. “It has only been 10 years. Recovery has to take a generation. We need people to stay. Invest. Put your kids in the schools. For all of us who are from here, this city is our love affair. New Orleans requires a love affair.”

**1** Clockwise from top left: Kate Armstrong, Category Development Director for Southeastern Grocers; LaKeshia White, Senior Compliance Manager for WBENC and her husband; Simone Bruni Crouere of Demo Diva; Michele Wink of UP Professional Solutions; Blanca Robinson, former Executive Director of WBEC South; Teresa Lawrence of Delta Personnel

**2** WBE Teresa Lawrence’s front yard after the storm.

**3** Teresa Lawrence and Ingrid Delahoussaye from Delta Personnel at WBEC South’s Women’s Business Opportunity Expo in 2011.

**4** Lawrence’s children in their rental apartment after the storm.

**5** Crouere’s distinctive Demo Diva pink excavators.

**6** Robinson presenting Wink with a WBEC South sponsorship award in 2009.

**7** Armstrong and White in February 2006, the first WBC Gulf Coast event after the storm.