RIP Guillermo Olivos, the co-founder of evacuteer.org. Here is the love letter he wrote to New Orleans on the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Rest easy, friend.

Dear New Orleans,

I dreamed of New Orleans from the North.

As a child I spent empty Sundays secluded with hardbound encyclopedias, researching all things supernatural. Voodoo.

Marie Laveau. St. John’s Eve. See also “New Orleans.” I found monochrome pictures of a grey and wide river city. Ghostly blurs in the edges of grainy streets and cemeteries, in the architecture and in the spaces between architectures. I was hooked. This was where sinner men ran to— all of the best songs were Crescent narratives. Each night noble outlaws and trysting lovers and misunderstood vampires and last-chance troubadours all came together at a cobblestone intersection under a marigold dusk. This was where real magic lived. The city of New Orleans.

I never saw it pre-Katrina. I’d wanted to, but at 22 I’d wanted to do everything else, too. That August I again studied the city, but my parents’ encyclopedias became a buzzing laptop and Washington Post articles. I read. My mecca of magic had been battered. And in that moment, pen in mouth, I saw that circumstance had met me square in life. I’d been waiting for this for so long— and now I should, could go. With reason. Not just to any city, but the one that whispered to me my whole life that I was right. That there was true magic above the mundane, there.

Fortune landed me a hundred miles east of New Orleans for the next two years, volunteering and working in Biloxi. From the nightly glow of my autumn bonfires, the City loomed a metaphysical constant across the Gulf Coast horizon of bent trees and boats in branches. The first time I visited across the Pontchartrain bridge, it was one lane each direction. In the middle of the stygian chasm, when all became water and debris and tires turning, the magic was real. Then I was on land, Irish Bayou, the apocalyptic abandoned subdivisions of New Orleans East, and into the city.
My New Orleans then was part destination, part symbol, part sister, all hope. I walked the Lower Ninth. I stood on the upper floor of a church, where a chalkboard preserved a roster of names and a survival narrative. I must admit that I started as a tourist. I counted in the first New Year on Bourbon Street, drinking away any guilt over the lights and revelry of the Quarter and the darkened quiet parts mere blocks away. I swayed in the main stage crowd of JazzFest 2006 and saw Springsteen redirect “My City of Ruins” through moist eyes under the marigold dusk.

New Orleans was part of me, but removed. I was not yet immersed. Not a denizen, but a staunch ally. I left the Gulf feeling that I’d missed the mark. I wondered if the universe would bring me back one day.

It did. Pen in mouth, I sent a blind e-mail one May afternoon to the city, asking for a reason to come. Robert called me. I liked his idea. So I came and we cofounded evacueer.org.

The nature of what we were building meant visiting every pocket of the parish, Audubon to Algiers, Broadmoor to the Bywater. The immensity weighed on my sticky morning jogs down St. Charles, in my soaked shirt-and-tie walks from the interstate parking lot to City Hall, and each evening across my thin shoulders hunched before Oak Street bourbon glasses. This was my purpose, I often thought while hustling plans and agreements and support together on borrowed tables and cubicles. I’d help make this better, sixteen hours a day, and become infused with that magic I’d always sought to know.

We finished our thick application just before midnight on a humid July evening, exiting the bar with the high heads of imagined heroes. After that moment, I got lost in the bottle and another thing started. But that moment, glancing up into the cast-iron stucco shadows of the balconies—I’d arrived at my cobblestone intersection. I had finally become something outlaw and lover and vampire and troubadour. Something striving to be good, immersed in the magic that makes that possible.

If New Orleans has been one constant thing throughout my life, it has been hope. Hope in more than what I can see before my eyes. It is the fortunate unseen, now and tomorrow. A city can change, and a man can change. We are individually and collectively capable of becoming better versions of ourselves, however slowly between the dark and dawn. The magic isn’t something to which I arrive—it’s something with which I go. That has always been New Orleans, in its history. And best I go forward, in my own history I go with the city.

I dream of New Orleans from the North.

With love,
Guillermo C. Olivos
Co-founder, evacueer.org