

# Lakeview, New Orleans, Antarctica, Our Earth

By *Adrian N. McGrath*

## **“Think Globally. Act Locally.”**

On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005 the small neighborhood near Lake Ponchartrain called Lakeview in New Orleans, Louisiana was devastated when the levees at the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal broke as Hurricane Katrina pounded the region. Countless homes, shops, and buildings were destroyed in the resulting massive flood. Churches, schools, and family homes that had been in the neighborhood for decades were wiped out. And many people lost their lives as ten feet or more of polluted, toxic water filled their homes.

Lakeview was but one neighborhood in New Orleans to be obliterated. Others included Gentilly, New Orleans East, Broadmoor, much of Mid-City, the Ninth Ward, and, of course, the Lower Ninth Ward. Other parts of the city and in fact the entire Gulf Coast suffered severe damage from Katrina’s winds and water.

Climate change, especially the warming of the Earth, is now a clear and present danger; and the horror that New Orleans faced in Katrina is now a threat to all major port cities worldwide from New York City to coastal cities in Japan, Australia, and other distant lands. What happened locally in the little neighborhood of Lakeview, New Orleans is now a serious issue for all the little neighborhoods of the Earth globally.

Although there are many positive ways to face this global crisis of climate change, students and teachers at St. Vincent de Paul’s Adult Learning Center, have decided that education and local involvement are key. We are putting into practice the idea “think globally; act locally.”

For example, we have started a new educational project. It is an internet correspondence between



*This neighborhood in New Orleans was flooded when Hurricane Katrina hit.*



*A satellite picture of Hurricane Katrina as it approached New Orleans. You can see Florida on the right.*



*The earth.*

our school and scientists in Antarctica. Several members of the United States Antarctica Program have become pen pals with our students. They exchange questions and answers about what is going on in each region. The students are recognizing that the loss of ice in Antarctica will have serious worldwide effects, especially for people in port cities that lie below sea level, such as New Orleans. Making students aware of the scientific research happening in Antarctica on many issues including climate change can help them connect a global crisis with their own local reality.

On Earth Day, Literacy\*AmeriCorps classes discussed local environmental issues such as levee protection and the shocking disappearance and erosion of the wetlands of southeast Louisiana. These wetlands, areas with vegetation south of New Orleans that were a buffer against the storm surge of earlier hurricanes, have tragically withered away. The loss of the wetlands and the barrier islands just offshore leave the city of New Orleans with no real line of defense from a major hurricane except the levees. (And during Katrina the levees broke in several places.) Hurricanes feed on warm water, and a warmer climate means greater danger for New Orleans.

In addition to learning about the problems, Literacy\*AmeriCorps classes are getting involved. In April, we joined with a neighborhood community group, Beacon of Hope, to clear away a forest of overgrown weeds at an abandoned house which was flooded out in Hurricane Katrina. Thousands of homes all across the city are still in a state of disrepair three years after the storm. Although clearing away weeds and other debris was a direct help to the neighborhood, the real benefits were educational, psychological, and symbolic.

What this simple act of helping to clean up the yard of a flooded-out home showed was that ordinary people can unite and take direct action to improve their environment.

The issue might be as grand as saving the wetlands in Louisiana or stopping the melting of ice caps in Antarctica. Or the issue might be as basic as cutting down weeds and fixing up a flooded

home in post-Katrina Lakeview. Large or small, the dangers of climate change can be dealt with head-on if ordinary people simply do two things — get educated and get involved.

The global crisis of climate change must be addressed by national governments and international organizations; but we, the ordinary people, can play a major role in addressing this grave danger. We can demand that the national and international organizations take the necessary steps to address climate change. And we can show that there is hope for the future when people learn more about the problem and participate directly in the solution.

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*Adrian N. McGrath is a Literacy\*AmeriCorps member and a teacher at the St. Vincent de Paul Adult Learning Center in New Orleans. Although the hurricane hit three years ago, he writes that “for many of us, Katrina is still happening.” Find out more about the Antarctica project at <[www.svdपालc.blogspot.com](http://www.svdपालc.blogspot.com)>. He thanks Sarah Fischer, director of Literacy\*AmeriCorps New Orleans, and Sr. Lory Schaff, director of St. Vincent de Paul Adult Learning Center.*



### Web sites:

- ⇒ For an instructive video showing how the coast of Louisiana has evolved over 7000 years, see <[www.nola.com/speced/lastchance/multimedia/flash.ssf?flashlandloss1.swf](http://www.nola.com/speced/lastchance/multimedia/flash.ssf?flashlandloss1.swf)>
- ⇒ For an excellent map with animation showing how the flooding occurred in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, see: <[www.nola.com/katrina/graphics/flashflood.swf](http://www.nola.com/katrina/graphics/flashflood.swf)>.
- ⇒ For amazing before and after aerial photos, see <[www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/new-orleans-imagery.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/new-orleans-imagery.htm)>.

### Think About It

**What does the author mean by “Think globally. Act locally.”**