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What New Orleans Taught Me

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n June 2009, I was one of the 28 lucky students to participate in the Jesuit Summer Institute for Advanced Study through Loyola New Orleans.

The program was structured in order to highlight a variety of issues and promote interdisciplinary analysis. Every morning, we met with Loyola professors John Biguenet and John P. Clark to discuss a pressing social issue. We learned about the history, geography and evolution of the city from an academic point of view. We would then spend our afternoons exploring the different neighborhoods. We helped rebuild houses destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, toured the districts, walked through the swamps, visited historical sites, and spoke with native citizens. In the evenings, we watched documentaries and met with guest speakers, including local scientists, radio jockeys, journalists, artists, and community leaders. Over the course of the two weeks, we each had the opportunity to explore an issue that struck our particular interest.

I chose to evaluate the relationship between race and community. Drawing from the multitude of sources, I began to construct a historical understanding of race in New Orleans and analyzed its impact on the evolution of culture. The study broadened my definition of race and reexamined its social role. Though the notion of race has always been associated with pigment color, I found that it actually extends beyond just that. It entails language, location, culture and tradition. It is a socially constructed means of othering, of drawing lines between people. To say that race is defined only by physical characteristics is to simplify the issue in a way that detracts from the significance of racial segregation.

Throughout New Orleans' history, segregation has occurred not only because of color, but also because people distinguish themselves from others based on dialect, district, educational background, and even occupation. It is important to note, though, that the patterns of separation apply to almost every human community – it is not unique to New Orleans.

Our notions of race are passed down from generation to generation. Children who grow up aware of differences tend to divide themselves into groups even when placed in situations with opportunity to mingle. If we are to introduce change into this human paradigm, we must first grasp the reality of the situation and look beyond particular events to understand the larger picture. The first step is to define the cultures with which people identify. Once we recognize the ways we define ourselves in relation to other people, we can begin to move beyond

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the narrow barriers we wedge between one another.

A large portion of perception is shaped by the media. This applies on both a small and large scale. It seems to me that before the storm hit, New Orleans' public reputation centered on the festivities of Mardi Gras in the French Quarter and the experiences of visitors rather than those of New Orleans' citizens. However, the events of 2005 redirected the attention of the media and world. Headlines began to highlight the community's hardships and triumphs, emphasizing the sense of comradeship that emerged from the damage. The image of the city developed into something deeper and richer than the superficial reputation it once had. Similarly, based on the events in our personal lives, we continually shift the focus of what we are defined by. Thus, how we define race evolves with our sense of identity.

New Orleans has a lot to teach us. If we examine the strengths, weaknesses, and unique characteristics of a community, we can begin to recognize the manifestation of its ideals in ourselves. As leaders, we must then be in touch with the identity of our city and the social barriers that exist within it to initiate positive growth and change.

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