

Businesses Try to Rebuild After Katrina

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NEW YORK -- It wasn't until this past June, nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina devastated his New Orleans coffee house, that Robert Thompson was really back in business. It took that long to clean up and rebuild after the flood waters had receded.

"It's hard to express the experience to people," Thompson said. "There's not one picture or sound bite that describes it."

Robert Myer's staffing company took less time to recover after Katrina swept through Gulfport, Miss. But, like Thompson, he sacrificed and labored to keep his company going.

"I was working 20-hour days; I slept in the car," he recalled.

Their stories will sound familiar to thousands of other small business owners who had to rebound from Katrina, or from Hurricanes Rita and Wilma weeks later.

Thompson's Fair Grinds coffee house was three years old when Katrina struck. The business, located in a two-story house in the Faubourg St. John neighborhood of New Orleans, took in about three feet of water. The floodwaters ruined the kitchen, leaving it covered with mold and mildew and literally stinking, and damaged the front part of the business as well.

The kitchen needed to be torn out and rebuilt, but there was hardly anyone around to do it.

"Trying to find workers, that's the toughest thing," Thompson recalled. "The people we dealt with _ craftsmen, carpenters, electricians, roofers _ weren't home and if they were, they were decimated themselves."

Help did come in the first few weeks and months, in the form of workers from Honduras and Mexico who arrived in New Orleans to work in the rebuilding.

"Thank God for them, they were the work force for many, many months," Thompson said. He recalled that a group of students from Allegheny College _ "they were bright-eyed and full of generosity" _ also came to help.

The first thing to be done was kill the mold, a process that took weeks. Then the kitchen had to be gutted, a job done in November, and the walls left open for two more months to be sure they were completely mold-free.

But Thompson noted there was no general contractor around and so many tasks of rebuilding had to wait because "we could only get one thing done at a time."

Still, the Thompsons got the coffee house going again despite the lack of a kitchen. In January 2006, they started serving free coffee on the patio, and also let people without water take showers on the undamaged top floor of the building. The Fair Grinds became a community center where people would gather, bring food, exchange items like clothing, books and furniture, and see what help they could give to or receive from others. And, with no mail or regular newspaper delivery, it was a place to get information.

All around the Fair Grinds, the rebuilding was very slow as well. "It was very primitive, like Robinson Crusoe _ we really were kind of scabbing together our existence at that point," Thompson said.

By this past June, the coffee house was finally ready to reopen as a business. Thompson was able to find workers, because working in a coffee house appeals to people. There are still many other loose ends before the rebuilding is complete, but "we'll work them through," Thompson said. On the plus side, he's made improvements to the coffee house from what it was before Katrina

New Orleans itself, of course, is still far from recovered. Thompson noted, for example, that he gets mail only three times a week. "Those are the kinds of frustrations we find ourselves with," he said.

Myer also had to rebuild his business, but while there was heavy damage to his office in Gulfport, Miss., the bigger problem he had to deal with was the disappearance of his clients.

Myer, who at the time owned Express Personnel staffing franchises in Gulfport and Baton Rouge, La., said the Gulfport office had water inside, but it wasn't unusable. However, he said, "we were annihilated from the standpoint of our customer base."

In the week before Katrina, he billed 39 clients; the week after, just five. He had to quickly go out and find business, and recalled, "The only way I could literally recruit people was talking to people who unfortunately were literally on the street," with no job, and no place to live.

So Myer operated for weeks out of his sport utility vehicle _ not only because of the damage to his office, but also because it was the best way to be as visible as possible. He set up signs around the vehicle with jobs that were available, and took applications right then and there. Eventually, he switched to a motor home.

Like Thompson, Myer has had to deal with a broken infrastructure. Gasoline, for example, was in short supply in the early recovery from the storm. He strapped gas cans to the roof of his SUV and drove to Pensacola, Fla., to get fuel that enabled him to keep

his business mobile. It took six months before the mail was delivered, but it's still not back to normal.

By eight months after Katrina, Myer felt like his business had recovered. And because he is in the staffing industry, and the devastated Gulf Coast is still rebuilding, he's had huge demand for his services. The storm actually has enabled his business to expand; he's opened an office in Hattiesburg, Miss., and "we've had tremendous growth in our Gulfport office _ we're past normal."

Around him, though, along the Gulf Coast, there is still widespread evidence of the disaster, and reminders that Myer's company was among the more fortunate ones.

"You have (cement) slabs where thriving businesses once were," he said.

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