

The people of New Orleans didn't make bad choices:

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The U.S. can't remain blind to its dying underclass

Grover Arbuthnot grew up and died in the crumbling St. Thomas housing project in New Orleans, a New Orleans of squalor and hopelessness that few tourists ever see.

It's a few miles and a 100 years from the jazz bars, upscale restaurants, and revelry of the French Quarter. This New Orleans is 99 per cent black and devastatingly poor. It is a place of boarded-up businesses, decaying schools, food stamps, drug use and hopelessness.

Grover was shot dead while riding on the handlebars of a friend's bike at the age of 20. His story can help explain both the desperation of tens of thousands of people left behind in New Orleans during the aftermath of Katrina and the apparent indifference to their plight by those in charge.

In 1983, within one month's time, Grover's father was shot not far from his home and his mother died of complications from a miscarriage. She left three children behind, including a nine-month-old boy -- Grover. Grover's mother was 21 when she died.

As he grew up, murder and violence was an everyday reality for Grover. At 14, he ran away from home and began living on the streets. At 15, he robbed some tourists at gunpoint. He was given a "juvenile life sentence" -- no chance of parole until he turned 21 -- and was shipped to Tallulah prison in northern Louisiana.

His family had no car, and the four-hour drive from New Orleans made it impossible for them to visit. For two years, he did not have one visitor. In an interview before he died, Grover reported seeing guards busting heads open with walkie talkies and boys stripped naked and stuck into cold, concrete-and-metal lockdown cells. Kids could expect old food, he said, and six-day waits for bed sheets.

Tallulah is where my daughter, Melissa, first met Grover. As a child advocate with the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, she was part of a team conducting a judicially mandated review of the cases of almost 3,000 adolescents, some as young as 11, locked up in jails across Louisiana.

After months of legal work, Melissa and her team got Grover released, but his re-entry wasn't easy. With little education, no job training, and having spent most of his adolescent years in prison, Grover saw little future.

Despite filing dozens of job applications, nobody wanted him. But through the efforts of JJPL and other agencies, he was finally able to find a job at Cafe Reconcile, a restaurant set up to provide work experience for young men just like him.

Things were looking up. He became a valuable employee at the cafe. He began GED classes. And after saving \$120 for a deposit, he planned to move into a little transitional-housing apartment. He already had the keys.

Then on June 2, 2003, neighbours saw Grover riding on the handlebars of a friend's bicycle. What happened next is unclear. Just before 8:30 p.m., the New Orleans Police Department responded to reports of gunshots. They found Grover on the ground, with multiple close-range gunshot wounds to the head. No one has ever been charged.

Grover's funeral was the seventh Melissa attended for JJPL clients in 12 months. Five were shot, one died in custody of tuberculosis, and one was killed in a crash while being chased by police.

"When you are dealing with people whose lives are so vulnerable," she told us, "success is such a fragile concept." Sometimes, she said, simply staying alive is a success in itself.

Thus, simply trying to stay alive was nothing new to the thousands left to fend for themselves last week after the city flooded and those stranded were ignored and forgotten.

This time, the abandonment was just more graphic and got better coverage. When ABC's Ted Koppel asked Michael Brown, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, why nothing was being done for the thousands of people crowded around the convention centre, Brown said he "didn't know they were there."

While this response may seem, literally, incredible (it certainly did to Koppel, who responded, "Don't you guys watch television?") given that CNN and the other U.S. networks had been broadcasting live coverage of the developing crisis around the centre for days, it may actually be true.

Most Americans work long and hard to ignore the Grovers of their nation, to make invisible the millions of people abandoned to lives of desperation, poverty and hopelessness, warehoused in dark corners of urban America.

To do otherwise might raise messy questions in a country that prides itself as being the "richest and most powerful nation in the world." Public tolerance of crushing poverty alongside major CEO salaries that average more than \$10 million a year is a result of a peculiarly American conviction that such savage inequity is somehow justified, even fair.

It is only through absolute, fundamental faith in this myth that Americans can remain oblivious to the plight of 50 million of their fellow citizens without medical insurance, the 13 per cent of the population (and growing) living under the official poverty line, and the 70 per cent of workers who say their standard of living is declining.

And through the lens of this myth, mainstream America views the emergence of an increasingly desperate and growing underclass with detestation and fear, an underclass they are quick to blame for its own destitution.

To most Americans, and to this federal government, Grover was the architect of his own fate. He simply made "bad choices."

Just as government agencies seemed oblivious to the inability of thousands to escape the city before the storm because they had no cars or means of fleeing, federal officials seem oblivious to the conditions that create hopelessness, anger and self-destructive behaviour in American cities.

It is only in this context that the appalling ineptness, inaction, lack of preparation, and indifference we saw played out in the New Orleans tragedy can be understood.

Don Sawyer is a writer and educator living in Salmon Arm, B.C.

He emigrated from the U.S. 35 years ago. His daughter, Melissa, is Executive Director of the Youth Empowerment Project, a program assisting inner-city youth exiting jail to acquire the skills necessary to escape the cycle of hopelessness and poverty that landed them in prison in the first place. It is located in the heart of inner-city New Orleans.

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