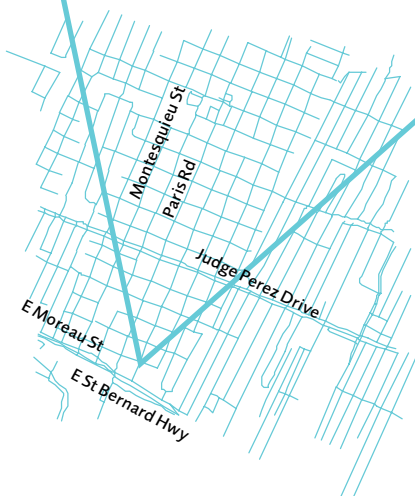




CASE STUDY #4

RONDA DEFOREST

Owner: Flour Power
Paris Road and
East Moreau Street



Ronda DeForest was born and raised in St. Bernard Parish. After a short stint out of state during college, she returned to the area and married her husband, Doyle, a North Louisiana native, who had come to New Orleans for culinary school. While raising two children, they started Flour Power, a bakery and café, in 1998 in Chalmette, Louisiana, near Ronda's family.

Tell me about your business.

Flour Power started out of our home. We expanded to a bakery and then expanded a second time three years before the storm to include a storefront with seating and a deli/café type feel. We offer coffee, pastries, wedding cakes, grooms' cakes, and three dimensional work, as well as healthy alternatives—salads with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables—to the local cuisine.

So tell me your post-Katrina life. What have you been up to since then?

We came back and opened the business within six months after the storm. We had very little water compared to everyone else so we were able to get in relatively quickly, by Katrina standards at least.

So we were back here in February of '06 and opened, but obviously there wasn't a big need for three-dimensional dog groom's cakes. There was a need for food, so we were basically throwing down on the hearty meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Also, there was no other place to eat and sit down. Everything was in Styrofoam containers to go, or it was the Red Cross coming around delivering in the trucks. So we kind of offered out whatever people wanted at the time. If they would come in and say, "You know, I haven't had a good stewed chicken," well, we'll cook it tomorrow. So we kind of just threw it out there and took whatever people wanted at the time or needed at the time. It wasn't until November of '06 that we took our first wedding cake [order] after the storm, and that was very exciting.

Why did you decide to return to Chalmette?

We were living in North Louisiana with my husband's family. The people there were wonderful, but it was still a hard adjustment for us. We came back in October [of '05] for my daughter's best friend's birthday.

We actually dropped the kids off at the party and headed in to see what was happening. We ran into my daughter and son's principal at their old grammar school, and she talked and talked and talked about the new unified school. So we decided to stay an extra day, until Monday, because that was [going to be] the opening of the unified school. And so we popped in with the kids.

When we walked in there, we knew we needed to come back. Just the vibe coming from what was going on: what they had accomplished, what they had done; their goals; what they had set out to do . . . it was an AMAZING thing that they were able to get the school system up and running in such a short amount of time and just looking around at all the things that were missing down here. . . . That was definitely the catalyst. We said, "We need to be here. Our kids need to be with people who have been through the same thing as they have been." I think it was important to bring our kids back to see that we could be part of the process . . .



That was it. It wasn't because we got a trailer. It wasn't because we got money from FEMA. It wasn't because there was a small business loan. There was nothing like that. We did it because we thought we needed to.

Did you get any assistance in coming back, or did you do this on your own?

We were able to procure a trailer through the Economic Department of Louisiana. They pushed really hard to get FEMA to release trailers to them so that they could dole them out as they saw fit. So we were able to get one through the Economic Department. To go through FEMA—I probably would still be waiting.

We decided to come back in the middle of October, and December 5th we had a trailer on the side of our building. Now no one told us, however, that if we got a trailer through that avenue that we were responsible for the electrical hook up and all the gas lines and all the things that were needed for that. If we had had the heads up, it probably would have been a little better, because we drove just blind on in from North Louisiana on a Sunday night, and we got here were all excited and then we had no water, no electricity.

So we did some primitive camping for a few days until we could get an electrician out here. . . . Other than that we had the initial monies from [FEMA]. They gave out \$2,500 and then another \$2,000. But [we had] no rental assistance because we had the trailer, no SBA loan because we were told that since we were both employees of the business and neither of us had jobs, there would be no way for us to pay it back. No grants, no Road Home funds. We had applied for small business loans; we had applied for GO loans and

bridge loans. Everything that was out there, I put in for. I applied for grants though Entergy and at least four or five other grants, and it just wasn't fast enough. It just wasn't. We had to move forward.

The building did not have flood insurance, just wind. . . . I think we got \$3,000 in insurance from this. . . . So we actually used the contents' money (amount insurance pays to compensate for damaged household goods) of our home for this [the business]. We were able to pay off our home with our flood insurance on that, and then we used the \$15,000 from the contents to get this place back up and running.

My father-in-law came down from North Louisiana, and my husband, father-in-law, and I gutted this place ourselves with shovels and wheelbarrows. It wasn't fun. It was disgusting. I don't even like to think about it because it was vile, but at the same time we weren't able to cook here. There were no other restaurants open. There was no place to get food or gas or anything. There was a FEMA tent, but [it was] very crowded and a lot of people staying here had nowhere else to go.

The place that I credit the most with helping us to recover is Emergency Communities. I believe they were originally in Bay St. Louis but then they moved up here. Emergency Communities fed us, really good food too—fun, creative food. They were so caring and wanting so desperately to help in anyway that they could. They had such a great vibe, not only just welcoming, but making us feel like there was someone out there who really cared for us and who came here specifically to do nothing but help us get to where we needed to be.

What has gotten Chalmette this far and what will help get Chalmette back to normal?

The people. Just the resiliency of the people coming back who are determined regardless that they are going to rebuild and be here. It's just an amazing community with an amazing group of people. Whether they've got money or they don't have money they're going to make it work. Whether the government is helping them or whether it's not, they're going to figure out a way to do it.

What did people say when they saw your business open?

I cannot tell you the tears that I watched fall when they walked in front of our case and I think one of the things about our business . . . we were fortunate that we didn't have a whole bunch of water in front so everything was the same: same chairs, same tables, same draperies, everything looked exactly the same. We had a lot of people come in and say, "If you'd just close the curtains, I can pretend like the whole thing never happened, because this looks exactly like it did before."

What's the larger role small businesses play in rebuilding a community?

They're almost essential personnel really. You can't have people back without a grocery store. Especially with gas at \$5 a gallon. People can't drive a half hour every couple days to pick up groceries. Certainly restaurants or just someplace to get out of a trailer and get away from everything [helps].

Right now we're hurting because there's no Wal-Mart. There's no Target, there's no big chain out there, and there aren't enough small businesses to fill that niche. There's no clothing store other than a Family Dollar. There's no mall. And that hurts not only our parish because there are no tax dollars coming in, but it also hurts financially because we have to drive all over to get to these places.

People need haircuts, people need groceries . . . gas stations, convenience stores, all the little things, even down to a little jewelry store to pick up something rather than having to drive miles to get it. I think that's what brings people back to have those there.

Why do you need these little things?

It brings you back to some sense of normalcy. It gets really emotionally draining to live in a place where there is

nothing, and it's hard to wake up every day and throw all your energy into something and there's nothing there. So if you can go across the street or two blocks over and pick up a bouquet of flowers to brighten up your day or not have to worry, "Oh dear, I just used the last of the milk. Where can I get some without having to drive a half hour?" . . . It's just normal. It's normalcy. It's not absolutely essential to living, but if you want people to come back to what it was before—and that's the goal I think if what you had there before was a good thing. And I think that if you have a community like ours who are screaming and telling that they want to come back then obviously we had a good thing—you have to replicate what was here before. Without those small businesses you don't have what was here before.

What can government do to make it easier for businesses to reopen?

I think that government could make it easier to access funds. I'm not saying, "Give us money." We don't want money for free, because we wouldn't be entrepreneurs if we thought that we could just get handouts. We're used to working for money. We're used to making our way in the world by ourselves without any help, but when something like this happens you can't possibly do it on your own. It makes it really hard and really draining and easy to give up a lot sooner than we would have before. Even to say "Here's some money. Pay us back when you can." Something that is not two days of filling out paperwork and then waiting in lines to turn in forms for a \$10,000 grant.



Photo: Carrie Conko