



Photo: Carrie Conko

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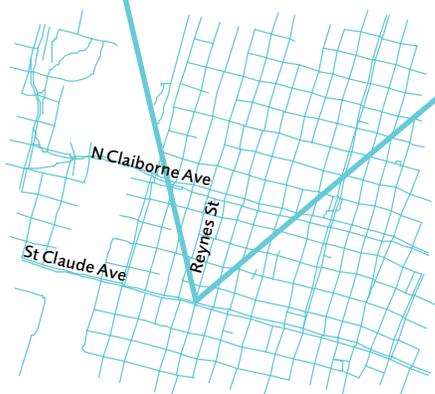
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CASE STUDY #2

CASEY KASIM

Owner: Discount Zone
St. Claude Avenue and
Reynolds Street



An Iraqi immigrant, Casey Kasim opened the Discount Zone Gas Station in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana in 2003. While he spends much of his time in the Ninth Ward, working at his store ten hours a day, seven days a week, Mr. Kasim lives in Jefferson Parish with his wife and six children. Before Katrina, the Kasims sent their children to stay with relatives in Houston, but he and his wife chose to stay and ride out the storm.

What happened when Katrina hit?

I was here during Katrina 'cause I didn't want to leave the business. I noticed the night before Katrina hit here there was a lot of breaking into businesses and gas stations so I decided to stay here. I brought my boat with me over here just in case, thinking, you know, I'm gonna need it and I got everything up. I thought the water probably going to come about a foot or two maximum. So I put everything up on the shelf.

At one o'clock in the morning, the winds started blowing here, and we started feeling the force of the wind of Katrina. Around five forty-five, six o'clock in the morning, I came down to the store just to check on everything, and all of a sudden I saw water was coming from the street and rising up. So I say it's no big deal. I expected the water going to be probably coming about a foot or two. And in probably about seven or six minutes, the water came up all the way and covered the whole—I almost got stuck. I was trying to open the door to get out, but see the door opens to the outside and the force of the water [made it hard] to open it. So I had to go and struggle to open the back door and went upstairs—[that's] where I was staying that evening, in my office upstairs—and then I noticed my boat was sinking 'cause it was tied to the trailer. I had to jump in the water and [release] the tie down for the boat. I stayed on the boat until like four o'clock that afternoon when everything kinda calmed down.

So tell me about the first couple of days then after the hurricane.

[It was] something I can hardly believe. This area looked like a lake and never . . . like I said, I was expecting probably maximum we'd get a foot or two of water, but when you see that much high water . . . I stayed here for four days after Katrina and water was up [so] high, I couldn't see the pumps.

When the water was coming up, I was able to get a few people from behind the station. They were calling for help, and I was able to bring them and had them sit upstairs waiting for the wind to go away.

After the rain and the wind stopped, [I heard] people from the neighborhood calling for help. I [went out] in my boat and start picking up a few people and brought them here. An hour later the NOPD [New Orleans Police Department] came with one boat. It was two officers and one boat. They saw me with my boat outside there so they asked me to follow them to the bridge. I just followed the instruction, and I followed [them] to the bridge. There they told me that they going to take my boat away, commandeer my boat. [I] told them, "You can do whatever you wanna do, but at least take me back to the gas station." They said, "Well right now you just go ahead with one of the officers." [I went] with him, and we went around picking up people, and we brought them to the bridge—six or seven families.



Around five-thirty, quarter to six, more enforcement came to the bridge from the NOPD [New Orleans Police Department]. They told me, “Now we don’t need you; you have to evacuate.” I told them, “Well, I cannot evacuate because I have my wife and my family up in the gas station’s second floor, plus there’s about seven or eight families upstairs too.” He says, “You have to leave.”

[I demanded again that the police officer] give me a ride back to the gas station so I can stay. He pulled his gun, and he said, “Leave or I’ll shoot you.”

I said, “I [am] not scared of your gun; I [am] not scared, and I [am] not asking something for pleasure. You take my boat, fine. Just take me back to the gas station.”

[There were] some people from CNN escorting that officer. He saw that they were recording [this], and so he told me, “Okay.” [He] told the other officers, “Okay, go ahead and give him a ride back to the gas station.” So they gave me a

ride to the gas station, and they took my boat, and they were helping other people in the neighborhood, picking up more people, and that was it.

That night we stayed here and slept. [It] was very hot, and there was no food . . . [A] lot of my food and groceries were floating up on the water. I decided to come in the evening and pick up a lot of salvageable food. We kept it upstairs for next few days. We salvaged a lot of food and candy and drink and water, and we started giving that to people the next day.

We stayed here [until] Thursday because we didn’t have no radio, no communication, no phone, so we didn’t know where to go. I thought at that time that the whole New Orleans community was underwater. That’s why we stayed here. We said it’s safe, and at least we have some food. But by Thursday we learned that the West Bank was not flooded so we decided to leave here. We had to walk all the way to the West Bank to get to our house.

So when did you come back?

It took probably about two weeks to get all the water out of the area, and it took another two weeks for them to open the road. So I was coming in and out this area like two weeks after Katrina. It took a year and a half to reopen this gas station. [It was] May of 2007 before I was able to open.

What did your reopening mean to your community?

It helped. . . . From talking to the customers a lot of them got the courage [to come back] when they saw that I am open. They say, “Okay, let’s go back, and things are going to get back again to normal one day.” They need my facility to provide gas, drink, food. So it helped a lot people to come back to this area when they see that business is open.

How has the Lower Ninth Ward changed since before Katrina?

It’s changed. . . . It was a very active community before Katrina. It had a lot of activity and businesses, and quite a few industries like Domino Sugar and seaports here on the river. A lot of people were living in this area. [Now] I see probably 20 percent of the people that we served before Katrina. Some people never left this area before Katrina. Katrina came and forced them to move and see another area. A lot of people decided not to come back because they found benefit in [living in] another state, like better work.

But those who came back, they're struggling. There's not much work in this area other than construction and cleaning and anything related to construction, but other than that. . . .

I see a lot of problems coming back in this area. There is a lot of drug activity—because the police are very reluctant to enforce the law in this area. There are a lot of abandoned houses around here right now, so it's become a trading place for buying and selling drugs. Before Katrina there used to be some drugs, but right now [I think there's more]. I feel sad about it, but what can you do?

Who are the people and groups who have helped you rebuild your business?

Capital One Bank was very helpful. They were very patient; they are just waiting to see things get better in my business. That's a big help when you get a break from the bank.

The other one is the SBA. I didn't have flood insurance, and the wind insurance I had did not cover the damage. So I had to go to the SBA and borrow money [about \$2 million].

[It] took some time, about a year, for SBA to process my paperwork, and they turned me down twice, probably [because of] the inexperience of the people that were handling the paperwork. There is a lot of red tape in the processing of the papers. The people sitting in Houston or somewhere doing the paperwork for your application don't know how bad it is and how much Katrina affected

you and how much damage you have. There were so many people applying and the loss is so big here that the amount of money I requested was probably something scary [to them]. But in the end, we got it. Without it, I wouldn't be able to open the place.

The community is also very supportive. They come here, bring their business. It is like a kind of family. I know everyone in the neighborhood because there are so few of them—so I know them by name and ask about them. Before Katrina I didn't know many customers. I just know them by face. But now I know them personally.

What do you think is keeping this community from coming back?

I believe people are scared of the future. They don't believe that [it's worth repairing] their houses if another Katrina comes and they lose them again. That's one reason.

Another reason is people probably found another job, in another state or another city. Also a lot of people living here were low-income. They were renting, so when they evacuated this area, there was nothing for them to come back to, especially because now the rent is going to be more than a thousand or twelve hundred dollars a month. It used to be two hundred or three hundred dollars a month.

If you could say one thing to the President about how government should help following a disaster, what would you say?

It's the people, not the government. The government can only do so much for the people in this area or another city. They [the people] have to do the work. They have to be more patient, more vigilant. They have to work hard to bring back the area.

The government—what can it do if I'm not willing to work? A lot of people, they got the money and they left. They went somewhere else. They got the money; they went and spent it on gambling or traveling.

We need [government] help, but the people, the community, they have to do the majority of the work.

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