

The Long Haul Commitment

MBAAs Work to Fill the Skills Gaps Left by Katrina in New Orleans

By Maya Payne Smart

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Three and a half years after the devastating waters of Hurricane Katrina breached levees, flooded neighborhoods and scattered thousands of evacuees across the nation, New Orleans is on the mend. But its recovery is slow and vulnerable.

The city's population hovers below 300,000 now, barely two-thirds the number it was before Katrina. The amount of skilled workers who have permanently fled far exceeds the recent influx of roughly 3,000 new young professionals eager to help the city rebound. A mismatch persists between the labor force's skills and the market's requirements, and it's not easy to attract professionals to a city still blighted by hundreds of scarred streets and tens of thousands of decaying, unoccupied buildings.

Nonetheless, lifelong residents and newcomers alike see promise amid the challenges. Under the banner of "experiential learning," a deluge of MBAs from prestigious universities have descended upon post-Katrina New Orleans to offer business and strategic planning advice to local entrepreneurs through initiatives like IDEAcorns, a five-day program launched in 2007, and Harvard Business School's Immersion Experience program.

And MBAs who worked in New Orleans before the storm have carried on with new resolve, stretching their skills to meet the community's needs. The eerie yellow water lines that mark buildings from the Ninth Ward to Lakeview to Gentilly remind them of how high the floodwater rose, how long it stood there and how

brave people were who lived through the ordeal.

This article profiles a few of the professionals who are committed to the city's renaissance. They wouldn't call themselves "social entrepreneurs," but their businesses seek far more than a profit – they want to preserve the distinctive character and vitality of New Orleans. And the community is stronger for their contributions.

SHAWNE FAVRE, THE NUMBER CRUNCHER

When Shawne Favre won a contract to lead operations for art4now, the distributor of the iconic New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival posters, in 2006, it seemed as though all of her life experiences had groomed her for the job.

She was just a year old when Bud Brimberg began selling JazzFest posters in 1975 as part of an entrepreneurship course at Tulane Business School, but she already was immersed in the music that the collectibles memorialized. Raised in New Orleans East by two jazz-loving parents, Favre says some of her earliest memories include the city's music festivals. By 1992, she had earned national recognition for her academic excellence and leadership at New Orleans' McDonough No. 35 College Preparatory High School

and headed to Florida for college. She earned a bachelor's degree in accounting from Florida A&M University in 1996 and moved around for several years, preparing financial statements and auditing books for companies in the United States and the Cayman Islands before returning home.

She enrolled at Tulane University's Freeman School of Business, became active in the Tulane Entrepreneurs' Association and ran its business plan competition before graduating just months before Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. Immediately after the storm, she worked in contract accounting positions in Washington, D.C., but always knew she would return to New Orleans. "I love my city, and I think when we succeed and when we return to our previous glory, it will be because of young African-American professionals," she says. "It's important to stay and be role models for the children that are here."

Back home in 2006, she saw an opportunity to launch Significant Solutions Inc., a consulting firm that would provide much-needed accounting support to recovering companies that couldn't yet afford to take on the tax and insurance burdens of adding permanent staff. Many of the city's large employers still had not returned and others were slow to staff up. Her business quickly grew to annual revenues of \$250,000

and Favre says resisting the temptation to expand gives her sufficient free time to volunteer with organizations like the YWCA of Greater New Orleans.

Favre's first client was Brimberg's Art4now, which distributes limited-edition JazzFest posters that feature the work of renowned Louisiana artists like Douglas Bourgeois. Brimberg hired her to do much more than mind his books, though. Her financial, management and interpersonal skills made her the perfect choice to run the multimillion-dollar business. Brimberg credits Favre with bringing together disparate elements of his operations, providing deeper insight into the company's finances and boosting worker morale.

"Because she is both an accountant and an MBA, she's been able to bring a level of sophistication – systems overlays – to a business that really was more driven on the arts side," he says. "She's formalized it into the kind of operation it probably should have been for many years."

Favre prepares financial statements, budgets, sales analyses and forecasts for the operation and brings in a staff of 15 to fill orders (art4now has no full-time employees of its own). During the four-day jazz festival, which takes place over two weekends in April and May, she supervises 30 independent contractors who sell JazzFest posters and other merchandise. Their tent attracts music aficionados who come to New Orleans to hear performers ranging from Wynton Marsalis to Van Morrison.

The museum-quality posters have become a phenomenon in their own right, with early editions that sold for \$3.95 in the 1970s fetching more than \$2,000 today. Art4now sells some 10,000 items per year, including the posters, postcards and apparel. "Before I started working here, I didn't recognize the significance of the brand nationally," Favre says, "so it's been very satisfying to be a part of a company that presents one of the most recognized names to the world."

When JazzFest comes to a close and customers' purchases have

been shipped, Favre helps a range of nonprofit clients, including Dillard University, prepare for tax audits. She ensures that their financial statements, revenue schedules and bank reconciliations are in order, and identifies problem areas and helps correct them. She also trains accounting departments and employees to do the same.

"I like to say that I use my MBA January to June and my CPA from July to December," she jokes.

Gizelle Johnson, the former controller of Dillard University, hired Favre as a consultant for the university's audits in 2007 and 2008. "The skills that Shawne has are very desperately needed here, and there are a small number of professionals, especially young Black professionals, who have them here," says Johnson, who now serves as vice president of finance for the Greater New Orleans Urban League.

Favre is hopeful that other young professionals will recognize the opportunity Katrina has put before them. "I think that New Orleans has always been a great area for entrepreneurship," she says, "and after the storm, there are even more opportunities for young skilled professionals to do consulting work and help businesses get back on track and expand."

ANTHONY PATTON, THE SUPER CONNECTOR

On a typical afternoon, Anthony Patton counsels a steady stream of small business owners – a mix of current and prospective clients – in his uptown New Orleans office. Many are aspiring entrepreneurs who think their ideas will be the city's next big thing – a restaurant, a magazine, a construction company – and they know that Patton will give them sound advice. "It's a kind of community service," he explains.

That's true, but the conversations also keep Patton abreast of what is going on around town. The visitors bring with them bits of market intelligence that inform his ground game. They are members of his diversity marketing and media company's target

audience, the niche of young urban professionals that his paying clients hope to reach, so whatever they are talking about, he's all ears.

Patton first arrived in New Orleans more than a decade ago to attend business school at the University of New

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— Anthony Patton

Orleans. While a student, he wrote a business plan for a Web development firm that would bring minority businesses online. After a professor urged him to launch the company, Patton and business partner Eddie Bonner formed EBONetworks LLC in 1999. Over time, the firm grew into a full-service marketing and advertising firm that puts together magazine ads, television commercials and live events. "After we developed more than 100 Web sites, we realized that the build-it-and-they-will-come model didn't exist," Patton explains. "We shifted to helping the businesses get traffic."

The methods he employs to drive Web traffic – from street teams to media buys – are so varied that when you ask New Orleanians what Patton does for a living, their responses range from business consultant to modeling agent. His tagline could be, "by any means necessary." His signature blend of creativity and flexibility, combined with a dense local network, is a big part of his appeal to an active client roster that includes nearly 40 companies across a range of industries.

As technology and the city of New Orleans have undergone enormous change, Patton has stayed true to his original goal of helping minority businesses grow by polishing their corporate identities, building their Web sites

and introducing them to prospective customers and allies. Small business owners like Mike Spears of M&M Demolition and Construction value Patton's ability to put them in front of audiences that they couldn't reach on their own.

"You really have to have a relationship in order to get work here, and a person like Anthony already has relationships to get in the door to present your company and get the exposure that you need," Spears says. "He's put us in the position where we have a couple of multimillion-dollar projects that we're working on closing."

Patton's network is extensive. He's got 60,000 people in his e-mail database, and his monthly First Fridays networking extravaganza generally draws more than 2,000 attendees. He stays connected to local movers and shakers by participating in high-profile initiatives, including Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission and the Louisiana Regional Authority's Louisiana Speaks visioning process. And he makes it his business to promote every minority- and woman-owned business in the city through The Minority Report, a 20,000-copy business directory he publishes and distributes each year.

His firm was tapped in 2007 to lead diversity outreach for Louisiana's Road Home program, a \$7.8 billion initiative meant to help homeowners displaced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita return to the region. "We were extremely successful," Patton says of the recruitment efforts that led to more than 150,000 grant applications, "so much so that they couldn't fund it." Budget shortfalls, grant delays and administrative glitches hampered the program and thousands of applicants still haven't been paid or are awaiting decisions on their appeals for larger grants.

Fusing a civic mission with regular business keeps him excited about work and helps the W. Anthony Patton Agency, EBONetworks' parent company, pull in revenues of more than \$1 million a year. Even after 10 years in business, Patton says he feels like this

Tourism Drives New Orleans Recovery

The millions of visitors who flock to New Orleans for conventions and festivals each year play a key role in the city's comeback. Tourism remains the crux of the local economy and its vital signs are strengthening. Hotel companies have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in renovations and upgrades and 980 restaurants (more than ever before) are open in the metro area. Visitor numbers almost doubled to 7.1 million in 2007 from 3.7 million in 2006. Before Katrina, 8.5 million tourists descended upon the city each year. When the National Black MBA Association's 31st Annual Conference & Exposition comes to town in September, be sure to aid the recovery by generously supporting local attractions. As you plan your trip, here are a few must-see tourist destinations.

Frenchman Street

Just downriver from the French Quarter, Frenchman Street is a must-visit destination for those who seek the musical and culinary diversity of Bourbon Street without the souvenir shops and daiquiri stands. Part of Faubourg Marigny, a neighborhood populated by immigrants and free Blacks in the early 19th century, Frenchman serves up food and music to suit any taste – from reggae to rockabilly and Tex-Mex to Thai. For a real treat, though, feast on Creole soul favorites at Praline Connection and then catch Jesse McBride, Charmaine Neville and other contemporary jazz performers down the street at Snug Harbor, a concert-style venue that is open seven nights a week.

Louis Armstrong Park

Named for a New Orleans native who dazzled crowds around the world with his expressive vocal and trumpet performances, the 32-acre Louis Armstrong Park offers a fitting bridge between the New Orleans that cradled jazz and the city struggling to pull off a post-Katrina renaissance. Merging the old world and the new, the park is home to Congo Square, an inlaid-stone area where African slaves danced, drummed, sang and gave birth to American music, and the more contemporary Mahalia Jackson Theater of the Performing Arts. The theater was ravished by Hurricane Katrina and remained in disrepair for years before reopening in January 2009 after a \$27 million renovation. The park and the many landmarks within it are worth a visit; they symbolize the resilience of the city's people and its culture.

Hurricane Katrina Tour

In 2009, New Orleans still bears the mark of Hurricane Katrina and local tour guides offer eyewitness accounts of the wreckage on a Grayline tour that is for your information, not entertainment. Nearly four years after the storm, many of the tour's props, from FEMA trailers to water-damaged homes, are disappearing as the city undergoes a rebirth. But as the tour travels through Lakeview, Gentilly, New Orleans East, St. Bernard and the Ninth Ward, a shameful number of dilapidated, unoccupied buildings still illustrate the guide's emotionally charged story of breached levees, government incompetence and everyday heroes. In just three hours, you will see for yourself the connections between coastal erosion, oil and gas pipelines, levee protection and hurricane destruction. More importantly, the reality check may leave you inspired to play a role in the recovery – if only to correct misinformation about the city and its residents when you hear it.

is still just the beginning. "An MBA is a curse," he jokes. "You can't see anything small. If you eat at a good restaurant, you start thinking about how to franchise it across the nation."

Not surprisingly, Patton expects his nascent 1stfridayslife.com social network for urban professionals to develop a national presence. It takes the spirit of his monthly networking events online by giving "1st Fridays lifers" a place to post photos, videos, event notices and messages. He is busy selling venture capitalists on the minority-focused social network idea and a chain of related fashion cafes in 30 markets from coast to coast. If his past success is any indication, it is just a matter of time before the 1st Fridays phenomenon comes to a city near you.

DÉSIRÉE YOUNG, THE MARKETING MAVEN



Désirée Young's clients call her by many names, but they all are describing her special ability to move their organizations forward. Jason Horne, owner of a martial

arts dojo, says she is his business GPS system because she keeps his marketing on track. And Karen Gadbois, a New Orleans preservationist and SquanderedHeritage.com blogger, says Young is a midwife who helps local nonprofit leaders "give birth" to sharper marketing messages. "She nudges you to do the hard work you have to do," Gadbois says of Young. "She keeps you going when you may have wanted to give up."

Young, a Jefferson Parish native, earned an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering from Boston University and spent the early years of her career working for a manufacturing company. But she quickly realized that she was more interested in the people who worked on the equipment than the equipment itself, and decided to make a change. In 2001, she enrolled

in an MBA program at Southern Methodist University's (SMU) Cox School of Business in Dallas.

A career turning point came during business school when she declined a corporate internship to wing it counseling a museum on making its retail store profitable and helping a financial planner launch a consulting firm. "Most of my MBA cohorts were a lot richer, but I knew my experience was so much fuller," she says of the summer. "At that point, I knew I wanted to be a consultant."

It took a little longer for her to realize that she wanted to start her own business. She interviewed with large consulting firms, but ultimately decided she wasn't cut out for a cubicle and returned to metro New Orleans to launch her consultancy, VentureWalk Business Partners, in 2004. She kicked her networking efforts into high gear to make inroads in a small business community that did not yet appreciate her capabilities. She proved herself one project at a time and by the fall of 2004, her pipeline included large contracts to manage strategic training initiatives at two boutique hotels. Then Katrina hit.

Young evacuated to Houston and considered staying in Texas and getting a regular job. Fortunately, a business school professor at SMU convinced her that post-Katrina New Orleans would be a hotbed for entrepreneurship. She returned and won a contract with the local small business development center to work in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Disaster Recovery Centers helping small business owners apply for Small Business Administration (SBA) loans. Young had to add Kleenex to the Spartan mix of supplies in her makeshift office because emotions ran so high. When clients snapped or distraught people had to be escorted out by security guards, she remained philosophical but shaken. "It wasn't personal," she says. "Some people had checked out and were still in shock or thinking, 'Why me?'"

Others, however, were poised to make comebacks. Young met Tina Emenes, owner of Tina's Cajun

Creations. In the aftermath of the storm, Emenes decided to go national and Young helped her place New Orleans Gourmet Foods items onto the shelves of Whole Foods Market stores and other major retailers. Later, Young discovered Linda McMillian, who was determined to do whatever it took to rebuild. Young recalls McMillian saying, "We've got to get our school open. I don't care about my house." With Young's help, McMillian's First Step Childcare Development Corp. won grant bids for more than \$200,000 to reconstruct a hurricane-damaged building and to buy computers, books, furniture and playground equipment.

While in the trenches, Young developed a consulting philosophy that still informs her work today. "It's about working with the person first," she says, "and then getting into the numbers and strategy of the business."

Years later, much of Young's work is still deeply rooted in Katrina. For a recent assignment, Young prepped Gadbois and other community leaders for presentations at "New Orleans Speaks: We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For," the inaugural event of the New Orleans Institute for Resilience and Innovation. With both compassion and business savvy, Young pulled the multitaskers away from their Blackberrys long enough to grapple with what their fieldwork can teach others about organization, empowerment and service.

It wasn't easy to get the overworked, understaffed nonprofit leaders to reflect on their work. "Dedicating hours to messaging and promotion seems indulgent when you're dealing with crisis situations on a daily basis," Gadbois says, "but she allowed us to see that we need polishing in order to survive and communicate our message."

This is Young's gift. Making small business owners and nonprofit leaders the best marketers and managers they can be energizes her and makes perfect use of her people skills and problem-solving ability. "These are intense assignments," Young says, "but it doesn't feel like work."

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