

# *Women's eNews*

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## **Rape-Reporting Procedure Missing After Hurricane**

**By Nancy Cook Lauer - WeNews correspondent**

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (WOMENSENEWS) – A heart-wrenching video of New Orleans singer/songwriter Charmaine Neville aired by WAFB-TV in Baton Rouge, La., shows one of the few rape reports coming out of the beleaguered area hit by Hurricane Katrina.

A distraught and disheveled Neville is caught on the video, which aired Sept. 2, telling her story to Archbishop Alfred Hughes of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

Neville, daughter of Charles Neville of the famous Neville Brothers rock and soul band, describes how she and others from New Orleans' Ninth Ward sought shelter on the roof of a school after the waters started rising.

“I found some police officers. I told them that a lot of us women had been raped down there by guys who had come (into) . . . the neighborhood where we were, that were helping us to save people. But other men, and they came and they started raping women and . . . and they started killing them,” Neville recounts. “And I don't know who these people were. I'm not going to tell you I know who they were because I don't. But what I want people to understand is that if we had not been left down there like the animals that they were treating us like, all of those things wouldn't have happened.”

WAFB News Director Vicki Zimmerman said the meeting with the archbishop was unplanned, and the video showed what happened when Neville caught sight of the archbishop, who was working with the TV station to help coordinate emergency relief for his archdiocese. As the cameras began shooting, Neville emptied her heart of the horror she had undergone in New Orleans.

Zimmerman said attention to the video is mounting, with bloggers linking to it on their sites. She said a WAFB news crew was in that area of New Orleans the same day and heard similar tales of rapes, violence and anguish. The crew did not witness any rapes firsthand, however.

“Do I believe it happened? You bet I do,” Zimmerman said.

## **Officials Unclear About Rapes**

But two weeks after Hurricane Katrina pounded the Gulf Coast, advocates for sex-assault victims say officials remain unclear about the number of rapes that may have occurred in the general lawlessness that followed the hurricane.

Police in major evacuation centers such as Houston are not taking reports about crimes that happened in New Orleans, said Judy Benitez, executive director of the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault, based in Hammond, La.

Advocates such as Benitez say that while it's understandable that crime statistics may not have been the priority in the immediate rescue and recovery period, they cannot accept what appears to be the absence in many areas of any process for rapes to be reported if they did occur.

Rapes in New Orleans won't be chronicled in Houston, for example, where 25,000 evacuees were transplanted from the New Orleans Superdome to the Houston Astrodome.

Officials with the Houston Police Department told Women's eNews that police are taking reports only on rapes that reportedly occurred in their own jurisdiction. Two alleged rapes were reported in the Astrodome last week, but both were unfounded, they said.

"Anything that happened in New Orleans, it would be reported to New Orleans and it would be New Orleans that investigated it when everything comes back up in New Orleans," Sgt. Giang Tien told Women's eNews. "The police, they were busy trying to evacuate people. When you are in a disaster zone, you just rush for safety."

## **'Courtesy Reports' Common**

Randy West is chief operating officer of Witness Justice, a national, grassroots nonprofit organization based in Frederick, Md. He said it is common for law enforcement in one jurisdiction to take courtesy reports for law enforcement in another.

He said his group is in contact with the U.S. Department of Justice, trying to find a way to streamline the reporting process. Witness Justice is calling for federal coordination of courtesy reports so local law enforcement will be able to help victims file courtesy reports, no matter where they are.

West said his group has received reports from hundreds of people who were victims of rape, robbery, assault and other crimes while they were in hurricane-stricken areas of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

He said victims don't know where to report crimes and are turning to groups such as his for help.

"It's hard enough for people to understand why so little was done to secure their safety and prevent the horrible crimes that are continuing to take place," Witness Justice President Helga West said in a press statement released Sept. 9. "But the lack of attention to their needs in the

aftermath of violence adds insult to injury. We are very concerned about the long-term impact that this traumatization – and re-traumatization – will have on survivors and their families.”

A single place to report crimes, such as a toll-free number, would be difficult to do because crime reports must be taken in person and signed by the complainant, Randy West said.

A detailed message left with a Department of Justice media office employee was forwarded to a media specialist, who did not return a phone call Monday.

### **Stories Going Untold**

With tens of thousands of hurricane survivors moved from the Louisiana Superdome and convention center and scattered to other sites throughout the United States, advocates worry that many of their stories will be lost.

Not only will the attackers likely go unpunished, the victims will have a harder time overcoming their trauma and trying to regain a normal life, said Benitez.

She’s sure the repercussions will be felt by these victims for years to come. Rape crisis counselors from her organization have been working with hurricane victims throughout the state, she said.

Rapes are to be expected in the chaos that followed the massive storm, Benitez said, especially assaults on the most vulnerable women and children.

“When you have people so desperate and good people mixed with bad, frankly, there is this level of frustration: ‘I don’t have power over anything, so I am going to dominate this person’ and it’s always the most vulnerable,” Benitez said in an interview with Women’s eNews. “We’re assuming the real fallout from that will happen later. Over time, I think we’ll get a better idea, but I don’t think we will ever have a full picture.”

*Nancy Cook Lauer is a journalist in Tallahassee, Fla.*

For more information:

Health Workers Fly to Aid Female Katrina Survivors:  
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2443>

Rapes in New Orleans Chaos Were Avoidable:  
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2439/>

Baton Rouge Television – Charmaine Neville: New Orleans Evacuee – [Unfortunately, there have been reports of problems viewing the video, possibly due to browser incompatibilities]:  
<http://www.wafb.com/Global/SearchResults.asp?qu=charmaine+neville&x=14&y=13>

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