Birth Of The Common Ground Health Clinic

by Orissa Arend

The Common Ground Health Clinic arose in the New Orleans west bank community of Algiers above the apocalyptic flood waters in the fall of '05. There were as many idealistic, fantastic visions for the clinic's future as there were scruffy revolutionaries, doctors, nurses, and alternative healers converged from the Beneficent Elsewhere. Their visions, fueled by endorphins of kindness and adrenalin of desperation, were a beautiful thing to behold. And though they sustained me at that terrible time, I gave somewhere between a zero and a minus one to the chances that any of these visions would endure. I'd wake up in two years, I figured, and this fairy tale collective of healers, who could do anything they set their mind to, and who embraced justice as a part of health, would seem as distant a dream as the nightmare of Katrina.

It didn't turn out that way. Who would have imagined that the *New England Journal of Medicine, the Washington Post, Mother Jones,* and *the New York Times* (they called it "The Little Clinic that Could") would take notice? Who would have imagined that local physicians, organizers, and visionaries would take a keen interest and form a board to direct the clinic? Who would have thought that an immigrant from Cameroon, a public health specialist in maternal and child health, would step forward to channel the idealism of the volunteer founders into practical avenues?

Antor Ndep Ola, the clinic's executive director of six months, says that the Common Ground Health Clinic is here to stay and to provide free primary health care for all who walk through the door. "We remain true to the model that we are here in solidarity. We are not charity. We are in solidarity with the community," she says. Even though there is no blueprint out there, Antor acknowledges, she sees the clinic as a change catalyst. "Yes, we are providing quality primary health care. But we are taking it a step further and that further step is recognizing that racism does exist and it does influence health. We recognize that there are people out there who are hard working people and still cannot afford health care and should be receiving health care."

Antor points out that the clinic was founded by volunteers entrenched in community building and community involvement, committed to creating the right environment for people to be able to break free from oppressive institutions, to find their voice, and to take ownership of their medical care. At the second year anniversary, neighbors turned out. "It was their party, not the clinic's party," says Antor. "And that is something I appreciate being a part of."

In order to understand the miraculous journey of this clinic's evolution, you have to know the story of its birth. When Katrina churned into the Gulf, Malik Rahim and his partner Sharon Johnson decided to hunker down in their Algiers bungalow. They had always ridden out hurricanes. And as a former deputy of security in the Black Panther Party, Malik knew quite a lot about making preparations for just about anything.

Three days after the storm a techno-miracle occurred. Mary Ratcliff, editor of the San Francisco Bay View, reached Malik on his land line. He was incensed. "This is criminal," he told her. "There are gangs of white vigilantes near here, riding around in pick-up trucks, all of them armed . . . People whose homes and families were not destroyed went into the city right away with boats to bring survivors out, but law enforcement told them they weren't needed. I'm in the Algiers neighborhood. The water is good. Our parks and schools could easily hold forty thousand people, and they're not using any of it. . . This is criminal." Ratcliff typed like crazy as he talked.

Meanwhile Scott Crow and Brandon Darby, white activists from Austin who had worked with Malik to publicize the plight of the Angola 3, felt drawn to New Orleans to help. The Angola 3 are Black Panthers who spent decades in solitary confinement at Angola State Penitentiary for their political beliefs. Scott and Brandon brought Malik some supplies and went to look for Robert King Wilkerson, the only freed member of the Angola 3, in flooded Mid City in New Orleans proper. But they were turned away by the authorities.

They returned to Austin for more supplies and this time vowed to swim to King's house if they had to. Brandon insisted that some rescue workers go look for King. When they agreed to take King's dog, he got into the boat and met Brandon on higher ground. Brandon and King headed for Malik's. It had been a long two weeks for all of us, wondering if King was alive.

Malik told Amy Goodman with Democracy Now, "While we was together, we – every evening, we used to have these dialectical discussions, and one of our main discussions was on why progressive movements have always started with such a bang and then end in such a frizzle. And we kept coming up with that we allowed our petty differences to stop us from working together. . . King said that the thing that we need to find is the common ground, and so with that, we took that name.. . . and Common Ground was founded. Sharon Johnson, my partner, she put up $30. I put up $20. And with that $50, we founded Common Ground."

Prior to the storm Sharon had no community organizing experience and she and Malik were a newly established couple. But she chose to stay. And with enormous grace and spiritual radiance she took on critical organizing roles and held together an odd, ever-expanding commune of people determined to help.

Ratcliff emailed her group the "This is Criminal" missive and they forwarded it around the country. A few days later activists began arriving in Algiers – Jamie "Bork" Laughner, an advocate for the homeless from D.C., street medics Roger Benham from Connecticut, Noah Morris from Rhode Island, and 20-year-old Scott Mechanic from Philadelphia (we called him Boy Scott to distinguish him from the two other Scotts). Two weeks later, Mo, a registered nurse and herbalist from Dillon, Montana, came. She and Bork had conceived the idea of an anarchist clinic in New Orleans before they met Malik.

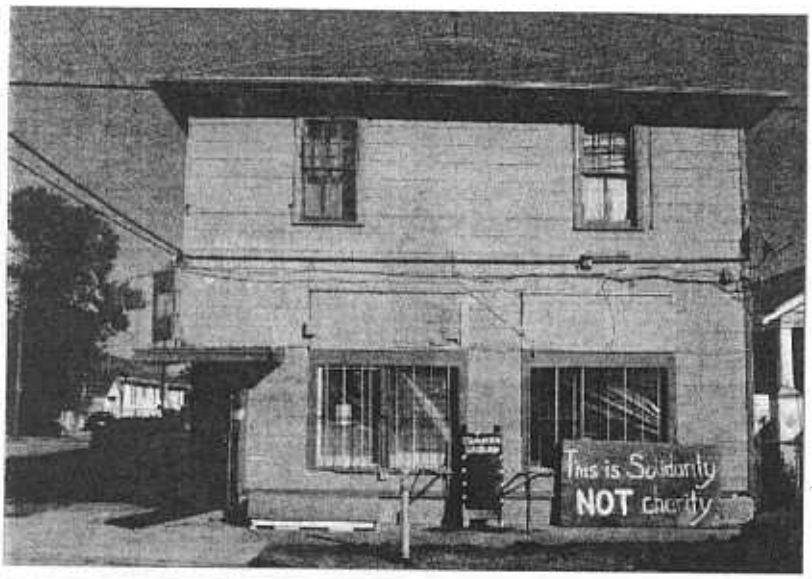
When the self-identified white anarchists knocked on Malik's door, he directed them to the mosque he once attended, Masjid Bilal, where they emptied the refrigerator, put tarps on the floor in deference to the sacred Muslim space, and set out supplies. This was September 9, 2005, eleven days after the storm. Bork spray painted "Solidarity not Charity," "First Aid," and "No Weapons, including Police and Military" on plywood outside of the mosque. Then the group began to think about how to get patients.

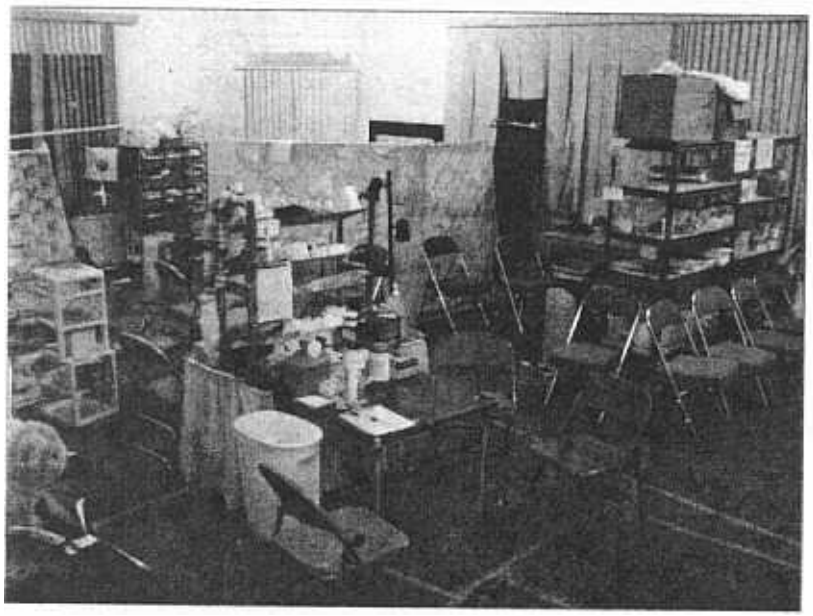
Their first ambassador was a local woman, Mama Souma and her daughters, who took them around the neighborhood knocking on doors. Malik was as interested in easing the racial tensions as he was in building a patient base. New Orleaneans fleeing the flood had been turned away at gun point by authorities as they tried to walk across the Mississippi River Bridge to higher ground. The governor had issued a "shoot to kill" order, affirmed by New Orleans' mayor and police chief, on looters, many of whom were only securing survival rations. Algiers had been invaded by soldiers, federal police officers and private paramilitary personnel -- creating an atmosphere of tension and trepidation. Bodies were left to bloat on the streets of Algiers, covered by pieces of corrugated tin and ignored by guardsmen passing by. Malik points out one of the bodies in the documentary "Welcome to New Orleans." But the film could well be "Welcome to Anywhere, USA" – anywhere that disaster pulls the usual covers off of profound systemic racism.

The newly arrived young white medics fanned out on bicycles, asking people if they needed water and telling them about the clinic. Malik knew that white skin had its privilege and its uses. He could see the real possibility of the whole African American community in Algiers being slaughtered.

When people asked the medics if they were Red Cross or FEMA, neither of which had made an appearance in Algiers, they said no, they were just volunteers who had come without authorization. They took blood pressure, offered first aid, and checked for diabetes, anxiety, and depression. "It was the street medics who really stopped this city from exploding into a race war, because they were white and serving the black community at a time when blacks were fed up. They are the real heroes of this thing," Malik said.

Boy Scott limited conversation with guardsmen to health care. But Bork saw fit to reveal her anarchist political context causing one incredulous soldier to





ask, "So you're the anarchists in the mosque brought in by the ex-Black Panther giving free health care?"

"Yeah. And we're environmentalists, too," Bork replied. The next day, the soldier, having done some research, addressed her by her real name.

The medics were followed a few days later by a caravan of doctors, nurses, grief counselors, acupuncturists, and herbalists from San Francisco. On September 11 a French relief organization, Secours Populaire, arrived. When the French physicians accompanied Roger on house calls, they were amazed at people's poor health. "Chronic illnesses, old untreated injuries, and results of neglect had only been exacerbated by Katrina, not created by it," Roger wrote in What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation. In this regard, New Orleans is merely a microcosm of a healthcare disaster that is happening nationwide.

Word spread and almost over night health practitioners and political activists arrived in droves. On September 22 with Rita threatening to make landfall who knew where, my son Jonathan called me from New York where he was doing a community medicine residency. He was aching for his home town. He said FEMA and the Red Cross had not been responsive to his offers to help and did I know of anything? I called Malik and he told me about the first aid station. But he recommended that volunteers not come until we knew where Rita was going.

Jonathan, who only had a week off, pondered the situation into the wee hours and then hopped a plane, figuring the worst that could happen is that he'd evacuate with me and his stepfather from our temporary digs in Luling. The next morning I crossed the Mississippi River and picked him up at the New Orleans airport. It wasn't hard to find him. As far as I could see, we were the only people there.

Malik wanted rain gear. When we found ponchos at a Dollar Store, we felt like we had won the lottery. We made our way to the mosque bullying through all the checkpoints and defying the mandatory evacuation order. The guards with guns made me nervous, but Jonathan's stethoscope worked like a charm – that and the fact that we were white. I left him at the mosque and headed "home" (euphemism for our rented house in Luling) wondering to what great vortex of weather and social chaos I had just sacrificed my first-born son.

Jed Horne notes in his excellent book Breach of Faith, "Six days after the clinic opened, some forty out-of-state activists were camped out in and around Rahim's home. By year's end, a total of one hundred seventy volunteers would have rotated through the clinic, including three dozen locals . . . Common Ground's first aid station had become a full-service medical clinic, still a cash-free operation dependent on in-kind donations and volunteers." In addition to traditional medicine, it offered herbalism, massage therapy, and acupuncture.

By early October, the clinic was treating over a hundred drop-ins per day. It also spawned the Latino Health Outreach Project to help migrant workers with health and legal issues. They even made house calls for workers injured on the job.

Scott Weinstein, a tall, slender RN from Quebec who arrived soon after the clinic opened quickly made strategic linkages with what was left of the New Orleans medical community. He says that the clinic reshaped the way he thinks about politics. "Most people think of direct action as taking a street during a demonstration," he says, "but big deal, so you got a street. This is not about taking the streets; it's about taking health care." SOLIDARITY NOT CHARITY became the clinic's motto.

During the week that Jonathan was there, the clinic never closed and volunteers slept wall-to-wall on the floor. Intake was thorough and records were meticulously kept. The list of projects and tasks on the wall that needed volunteers included: critical incident debriefing; medical legal support – or covering our heinies; and infusing all we do with anti-oppression intentions.

Jonathan told Michelle Garcia of the Washington Post (Sun. Dec. 4, 2005) that locals such as Swamp Rat Jack, who lives across the street from the clinic, stayed away from the medical facilities with soldiers stationed out front. He preferred to have his asthma checked at home, where he could show off photos of the gators he had shot down in the bayou.

Two years later, the clinic today is a registered 501c3 organization providing primary healthcare, social work, acupuncture, herbalism, prescription assistance, health education, HIV testing, referrals for specialty care, and a mobile unit for Latino health outreach. Thanks to donations from the community, contractors have finished the remodeling of the storefront space begun by volunteers when the clinic moved out of the mosque and beyond "disaster mode." Antor envisions a larger space in the near future, owned by the clinic itself, and a financial endowment to ensure its sustainability. Noah Morris, one of the original medics, is chairman of the board. "My vision for this kind of health care is evolving," Antor says. "The clinic is a laboratory for learning."

For more information on the current status of the clinic, please visit www.cghc.org and click on Health on the Ground progress report September 2007.

Orissa Arend is a mediator, psychotherapist, and community organizer in New Orleans. You can reach her at arendsaxer@bellsouth.net.