

## A brief comment about Understanding Orleanians By Laurentia Ruby, PsyD, former resident

New Orleans is a major city. It is also a village. Most Orleanian families have lived there for generations. Close family friends are considered family members—I was an adult before I figured out which of my “aunts and uncles” were actually blood relatives. This is particularly true of the African American community, which is so heavily represented among the newly homeless. It doesn’t matter a bit if they aren’t actually related—the feeling is exactly the same as blood kin. Neighborhoods are very important, too, and each neighborhood has its own personality. The classic question when Orleanians first meet each other is, “Where did you go to high school?” We learn a lot about the person’s family and background from that question—we know their neighborhood.

Orleanians are passionate about their city—no surprise that they don’t want to leave, even now. Native Orleanians consider the city a crucial part of their identity. Losing the city will almost certainly impact their sense of who they are. The city has a definite persona. Losing New Orleans is like losing a close loved one.

Most Orleanians are not Cajun; some are Creole, but few speak French. Cajuns are descendents of French Canadians displaced by the English in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and most live in the Bayou area, which was not directly flooded by the breaks in the levees. Creoles, who mostly live in and near New Orleans, are descendents of the French and Spanish settlers, and often their slave mistresses. The Creole culture is still a strong influence, but for the most part, the evacuees are plain ole English-speaking Americans who watch the same ole TV shows that we all watch. Some expressions will be a bit unfamiliar (i.e., a “neutral ground” is the grassy area usually referred to as a “median,” a “dressed” sandwich is one with lettuce and tomato), but there won’t be much language barrier. In fact, the downtown New Orleans accent sounds a lot like a New York accent, only much slower.

Orleanians are talkers. We strike up conversations with everyone we meet, and self-disclosure to complete strangers is considered a normal friendly interactional style. Grocery store lines are slow, because a little conversation happens with each transaction. Not talking to strangers is considered kind of rude. Getting Orleanians to talk is usually very easy. If they aren’t talking, that’s data—something’s up.

For many Orleanians, laughing, joking and enjoyment are primary coping skills. Consider the Jazz Funeral, in which mourning is the tone on the way to the burial, but celebration and dancing is the theme on the way home. If there’s not a lot of joking and laughing going on, things are very bad indeed. Music is a lifeline.

Books have been written about the culture of this wonderful city, but these are just a few notes for responding to these people who are exiled from their cherished home.