

Faculty on the Front Lines, Supporting the New Orleans Community

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Just before New Orleans went into quarantine, School of Public Health Assistant Professor Julie Hernandez (LA *10) snapped a picture of a deserted Bourbon Street. “The caption that I put was that it was going to be a different kind of storm, but it was going to touch the city just the same as Hurricane Katrina,” Hernandez reflects.

And she would know. Hernandez, who came to New Orleans as an exchange student in June of 2005, intended to spend a yearlong sabbatical at Tulane. Instead, she wrote her doctoral dissertation on civic engagement in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and went on to become a faculty member at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

Civic engagement is not just an area of academic interest for Hernandez. In addition to teaching and maintaining her research this semester, Hernandez has been volunteering at federal drive-up and city walk-up testing sites and organizing essential deliveries to housebound New Orleanians through the Greater New Orleans Caring Collective.

“You get to talk to people, listen to their stories and empathize with their fear. Those small acts of kindness are miniscule ways of fighting back too. This disease can be dehumanizing. It’s making us afraid of other people, and I wanted to do something to balance that a little.”

An inveterate educator, in addition to taking patients’ information at the testing sites, she passes out information sheets and answers questions from those waiting for tests, providing a knowledgeable resource in the face of conflicting information.

Hernandez is also hoping to use her professional interest in using geographic information and digital data to support public health during the pandemic. In the past, she's worked on mapping cases of Ebola to help identify hotspots. "Mapping where cases are is a good way to understand where the clusters are and where it might be going next. What I want to do is give a tool to the city of New Orleans that shows where the hotspots are this week, where you need to go for contact tracing or if you want to do quarantine," says Hernandez.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Hernandez saw waves of what she terms "micro-solidarities" as people in the neighborhood came together to help each other cope with the fallout of the storm. With COVID-19, she's been heartened to see that same civic engagement despite social distancing as neighbors offer each other masks, seeds, baked goods.

And she sees something even more inspiring at Tulane. "I'm immensely proud of our medical and public health students whom I see volunteering. I've seen them at test sites, at food banks — you can't throw a rock without hitting a Tulane student who is volunteering. You know [the Tulane motto] 'Not for One's Self but for One's Own?' We are living by that right now and that's a good thing."