

Katrina: Pascagoula discovers silver lining

Anna Wolfe, The Clarion-Ledger

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(Photo: AP)

PASCAGOULA – Several small, brightly colored cottages neatly arranged in downtown Pascagoula are home to the city's newest up-and-coming businesses. The tiny retail space, Anchor Square, is also an illustration of the hope still very much alive in the Pascagoula community 10 years after the biggest tragedy in its history: Hurricane Katrina.

Pascagoula, From Katrina to Today | Gallery

Mississippi Emergency Management Agency donated the homes to Pascagoula in the wake of the storm and during its recovery efforts, but in the following five years, the city found itself with a surplus of these cottages. In 2011, the city turned them into leased space for new entrepreneurs.

Jen Gurley, owner of Art en Noir, an art gallery in one of the remodeled city-owned homes, said the vibrant and ever-growing arts, eats and retail district just blocks from Anchor Square wouldn't be there today if it weren't for these incubators, where many of those businesses started.

City of Pascagoula Public Relations Specialist Amy Pitre said this program is just one of the silver linings of Hurricane Katrina. The city has also been able to make improvements and additions to its parks, relocate and restore the Round Island Lighthouse and build a new senior citizen center.

On a Tuesday afternoon, five gray-haired women work on an array of ceramic projects in the senior center pottery class. One woman in a colorful, tie-dyed blouse makes a model ship, complete with skull and cross bones at the front, for her Pirates of the Caribbean collection. The state-of-the-art facility, which stands in the place of an old apartment complex that existed before Katrina, is lively enough to make any twenty-something wish she were 55.

The center, which opened in 2010, can accommodate a much larger crowd of Pascagoula's older residents than the previous space. But the city put the old downtown facility to good use, turning it into a city-owned and -operated art gallery and classroom space called Arts on the Avenue.

Ten years later, Pascagoula's Ingalls Shipbuilding, the biggest employer in Mississippi, is recovered and thriving. Richard Schenk, vice president of programs management, said the shipyard is in much better shape from a survivability standpoint, as it has increased its storm preparedness. What may be more valuable than that is the persisting strength of its 11,000 employees, who came together after the hurricane to support one another.

"It comes down to people," Schenk said. "There clearly was a sense of camaraderie and a desire to build back and build back better."

Such is true for the entire Pascagoula community, including owners of smaller businesses like Thad Brumfield of Coastal Clothing, who restored his clothing shop after a 4-foot flood. Red paneling on the bottom half of the store walls indicate the structural damage and repair — a watermark — in contrast with the white wall above.

His shop, Brumfield said, is "certainly not back to pre-Katrina levels." Because the cost of homeowner's insurance has risen, he believes people are not spending as much of their money on clothing and accessories. With 22,240 residents, the city's population still has not returned to a pre-Katrina level of 24,895.

Still, he is happy with the progress he and his business have made, expressing a widely shared attitude: "It's time to move on," he said.

When Pitre first returned to Pascagoula after the storm, she had no way to maneuver through town, no landmarks off which to base her location. Now, in 2015, she has new monuments, a new community — a new normal.

Contact Anna Wolfe at awolfe@gannett.com.

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