Five years after Hurricane Katrina, florists who endured Mother Nature’s wrath now face down the economy.

> When Floral Management contacted Gulf Coast florists about Hurricane Katrina for a December 2005 cover story, remnants of the storm’s destruction still clung — wet, moldy and overwhelming — all around our sources. Five years have cleared away the physical signs of the region’s most harrowing experience, but the financial and emotional damage lingers.

“There are thousands of stories of heartbreak and hard work,” said Roger Villere, Jr., AAF, owner of Villere’s Florist in Metairie, La., and Covington, La., and a candidate for Louisiana’s lieutenant governor. Here are just four them.

“When you just roll with the circumstances.”
—CRAIG BARKER, BIG EASY FLOWERS, NEW ORLEANS

When Craig Barker finally had access to his warehouse-district shop (between the French Quarter and the Superdome) nearly a month after Katrina, “it looked like a science project,” he said of the abundance of mold from dead flowers in coolers at Big Easy Flowers. Wind ripped off the shop’s roof, exposing the 2,500-square-foot second floor to the hurricane’s elements.

Boxes of customer records, holiday decor, wedding accessories and computers blew away or rusted. It took two months to document about $60,000 in losses for his insurance company — an effort that would have taken considerably longer had Barker lacked a business permit to show the National Guard. (Orleans Parish residents could not return for several weeks, and even with his permit, Barker said he was allowed in for short increments.)
The magazine of the Society of American Florists (SAF)

“After the levees broke, New Orleans came under martial law, so for (at least) 20 days, we didn’t even know if we still had a building in the city,” said Greenleaf Wholesale Florist President Scott Kitayama, AAF. Unless they had identification as emergency service personnel or a special permit to work, residents were barred from entering the city, which was blockaded by police.

Ultimately, the building’s structure was not badly harmed, though the inside “essentially turned into a compost heap,” Kitayama said of the 15,000-square-foot facility, located in New Orleans’ lower garden district — a mere block from the Mississippi River. When Kitayama visited in November, Greenleaf had been cleaned and running for about a month, but the city remained in ruins.

Again, what hurt the most was losing people: About 30 percent of Greenleaf’s retail customers went out of business and two-thirds of its sales team relocated.

“Harold (Tani), who had been manager since 1975, did miraculous things to bring the store back,” Kitayama said. Tani downplays his role, insisting that the true heroes were floral industry colleagues who donated $70,000 for the branch’s recovery and Greenleaf corporate office staff who leapt into action.

“The business was like my baby,” Tani said. “I just did what it took to keep it alive.” Among his efforts: providing rides for employees who lost their vehicles, working 15-hour shifts and expanding his job description to receptionist, janitor and deliveryman. He attempted to set up three trailers in the store’s 40,000-square-foot covered parking lot as temporary lodging for displaced workers, but FEMA denied the request because of issues with gas in an enclosed space.

In the middle of the chaos, Tani was still able to recruit experienced employees, including Luke Travasos.

Travasos, now assistant manager for Greenleaf’s New Orleans branch, was the co-owner of Floral Enterprises, a wholesale operation in Kenner, La. Floral Enterprises opened less than a year before Katrina flooded its building and ripped off its receiving doors. Its two refrigerator units ended up on the roof; one had softball-sized holes in it.

“The insurance company battled us back and forth for months,” Travasos said. “I just didn’t have the energy or the deep pockets to continue.” His former partner stuck with the infant company, which now sells only holiday décor.

Travasos was grateful to go back to work and help a company that was in dire need of assistance. This January, he’ll celebrate his fifth anniversary with Greenleaf.

Since Katrina, Greenleaf has instituted an electronic backup system that transmits branch location records to the home office in Colorado, so they won’t be lost in another disaster.

His permit came from Le Pavillon, a nearby four-diamond hotel, that commissioned him to make a lobby centerpiece. “That was the best call of my life,” Barker said of the order on Sept. 19, 2005 (less than a month after the levees broke) that restored his faith that the business would survive. “They had FBI and Homeland Security officials staying with them (and) needed to maintain their luxurious reputation. They needed us,” Barker said. “I’ve never been so overjoyed.”


The biggest challenge for Barker was the dispersion of people.

“It was hard to find people to buy flowers and it was hard to find people to arrange them, because so many had moved,” he said. “We had employees commuting 90 miles because they lost their homes in New Orleans.” Barker made weekly trips to Houston, where his four children were in school for a year after Katrina. To get by, the team of three (down 50 percent) often worked past midnight, making sure Big Easy Flowers could fill every single order it received, short staffed or not.

Like the city’s displaced population, Big City Flowers came back gradually. “It was about a year and a half before things began to feel normal again,” Barker said.

Before Katrina, Big Easy Flowers’ revenue was $700,000, which actually rose to $1.1 million a year after recovering from the storm. In 2006, he was also able to increase the staff size to 12, twice its pre-Katrina size. But since the recession and the recent ban on deepwater offshore drilling, sales have dropped to $800,000. The shop is back to six employees.

None of these setbacks has affected Barker’s management style nor prompted him to purchase additional insurance. “Every situation is different, so can you ever be completely prepared?” he said. “You just roll with the circumstances as they drop in your lap.”

“‘The business was my baby. I just did what it took to keep it alive.’
—Harold Tani, Greenleaf Wholesale Florist, New Orleans

STRONG RECRUITS Although Harold Tani (right) had to act fast to find employees after Katrina, he didn’t have to look far for quality picks, such as Luke Travasos, left.
There were about two hours when I was truly fearful that I wouldn’t live through it.”

It took eight months for Boykin to rebuild the shop with the $75,000 recovered from business insurance. “We just scraped by on that,” he said. A $30,000 grant from the governor helped clean up his home.

Five years on, “it’s still not how it was,” Boykin said. Sales are down 40 percent from what they were pre-Katrina. To compensate, he let go a full-time designer and reduced the driver to a part-time position. Boykin and his business partner, Derek Brown, work alone filling orders. He also dropped his wind insurance, which “skyrocketed after the storm,” he said. He’s holding on to his flood insurance though.

Adams Loraine was the only flower shop in Bay St. Louis to come back after Katrina, said Boykin, who estimated that about 10 percent of total businesses in the area returned.

Initially, the lack of competition helped. But over time, the absence of neighboring businesses took its toll.

About a year ago, Boykin moved the store from his home in Bay St. Louis’ historic area near the beach to a strip mall off Highway 90, next to a Domino’s Pizza and a Quiznos.
“Katrina’s changed me a lot,” Boykin said. “I came back because I thought I had to after I had so recently invested a lot of time and money into the business. Some days, you wonder if it’s worth it.”

While “hanging on” can be exhausting, Boykin is careful to not let his fatigue or frustrations show. “Katrina didn’t change how we do business,” he said. “We’re still here to deliver flowers and customer service. We have to show our gratitude to those who keep us alive.”

One thing he knows for sure, though: He won’t dismiss another storm that’s at least a Category 3.

“I’ve lived in the Gulf my whole life and I thought I was indestructible,” Boykin said. “But I realize now, that’s not the case. The next time a Katrina comes my way, I’m running.”

Villere was among the earlier evacuees to return to the New Orleans metro area after the storm. Within two weeks, he was standing in front of his flower shop in a strip mall in Metairie, about six miles west of downtown New Orleans, which had its refrigeration and air conditioning units blown off.

“The shop was predominately intact, because we had parked our delivery vans in front of the windows,” Villere said. Two of those six vans, which acted as a wind barrier during the storm, went on to shuttle police officers (who lost many vehicles in flood waters) in the ensuing weeks, while members of the Villere family repaired and cleaned the 5,000-square-foot flower shop.

“We were supposed to have a couple weddings the weekend after Katrina, so we had just received a huge shipment, which had died, leaving a really putrid smell,” Villere said. Wearing masks, Villere, his wife, Donna, and three sons — Roger III, Mark and Jacques — tossed ruined product, swept and scrubbed in the dark and in the heat. (In restoring electricity, retail businesses ranked low on the list of priorities.)

By October, the shop that the husband and wife started in 1969 reopened. Unable to afford print or radio advertising, the family went to chamber of commerce and small business meetings, spreading the message that they were back. With local wholesalers still out of commission, the Villere’s staff (10 strong, down from 35 pre-Katrina) made frequent drives to Baton Rouge for flowers.

The Villeres’ second shop in Covington incurred wind damage and lost electricity. The 2,000-square–foot shop, which generates about 10 percent of the company’s business, reopened in late October 2005.

To survive, Villere took out a 30-year Small Business Administration loan for “a couple hundred thousand dollars,” he said, adding that he recovered very little from his insurance company, which had
an exclusion for perishables. Villere estimates he lost about $25,000 worth of fresh flowers.

By early 2007, the shop’s sales were up 50 percent from before Katrina — a sign of the hard times others endured, as much as of the staff’s hard work.

“It was devastating, but funerals really gave us a kick start,” Villere said. “Hurricane Katrina left a lot residual stress, especially for the elderly who couldn’t cope with their homes and routines vanishing overnight. A lot just gave up.” And a majority of Villere’s competition closed or moved away. For the New Orleans metro area, some estimates put the number of displaced people at 1 million. Villere said 30 flower shops also disappeared. “People have come back piecemeal.”

By 2009, the population was close to pre-Katrina levels and the competition was still down. Having outgrown the strip-mall site, the shop moved five blocks to a 7,000-square-foot freestanding building. Villere’s three sons manage 40 employees there while he serves as chairman for Louisiana’s Republican Party and runs for lieutenant governor, a calling that arose from what he considers inept governing by state leaders following Katrina. “There’s a need for leaders who will work with the national government to enhance our businesses and our tourism,” Villere said.

Despite the resilience of his business, Villere said he’s never felt a sense of relief in the past five years.

“Every time there’s a storm, I wonder, will this be another Katrina?” he said. “And then there’ve been subsequent disasters — the recession, the B.P. oil spill and now the moratorium on offshore drilling.” The moratorium, which business owners say has stifled spending as oil workers worry about job security, is a major issue Villere raises on the campaign trail. In the last year, he has seen his sales drop to pre-Katrina levels. But for every new challenge, hard work is his answer: “Deliver quality arrangements and customer service every day. Never rest on your laurels. Never take any day for granted.”

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FIGHTING FOR FLORISTS
Roger Villere, Jr., AAF, a candidate for Louisiana’s lieutenant governor, has called for the repeal of a deepwater oil drilling moratorium.