

## President Barack Obama praises rebuilding effort in New Orleans five years after Hurricane Katrina

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### John Pope, The Times-Picayune

Five years to the day after **Hurricane Katrina**'s assault, **President Barack Obama** on Sunday praised the progress in rebuilding the New Orleans area but reminded an audience at Xavier University that much remains to be done.



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President Barack Obama shields his wife Michelle from Sunday's unrelenting rain as the couple tours the Columbia Parc development on Sunday.

"The work ahead will not be easy," he said, "and there will be setbacks. There will be challenges along the way. But thanks to you, thanks to the people of this great city, New Orleans is blossoming again."

In addition to praising Cabinet members and other administration officials who have helped bring the city back, Obama promised that these men and women, who were with Obama in Xavier's University Center Ballroom, will continue to be partners in this effort.

"My administration is going to stand with you, and fight alongside you, until the job is done, until New Orleans is all the way back," Obama said to loud applause from 800 spectators.

Without mentioning his predecessor, George W. Bush, by name, Obama said that the federal response to the 2005 storm represented "a shameful breakdown in government that left countless men and women and children abandoned and alone."

New Orleans, he said, "had been laid low by indifference and neglect."

With that in mind, Obama said that he was determined when he took office in January 2009 to slice through red tape and end turf wars that were standing in the way of bringing the storm-stricken area back.

"I wanted to make sure that the federal government was a partner, not an obstacle, to recovery here in the Gulf Coast," he said.

Traveling with Obama were his wife, Michelle, and their daughters, Malia and Sasha.

The six-hour visit included stops at three sites that had been submerged in Katrina-related floodwater.

Xavier was under 6 feet of water five years ago. The Obamas also lunched in Mid-City at Parkway Bakery & Tavern, which took on 8 feet of water, and the president and his wife paid a call on Maude Smith, who lives in a new apartment in Columbia Parc development, a mixed-income complex of apartments and townhouses that is being built where the St. Bernard public housing complex once stood.

Smith, who had been a resident in the St. Bernard development, had to be rescued from her building by boat.

During his visit, the president did not announce any new initiatives for storm recovery or coastal restoration, and he did not address the controversial moratorium on deepwater drilling.

Gov. Bobby Jindal, who was in the Xavier audience, faulted Obama on those points.

Jindal said he was glad that Obama's visit will draw attention to the area, but he said he wished the president had discussed the moratorium and made a "more explicit commitment to restore our coast."

Before Obama spoke, he met with about 15 community leaders, including Dr. Karen DeSalvo, the executive director of Tulane's Community Health Center, and Anne Milling, founder of Women of the Storm.

In addition to praising the president's understanding of the issues confronting this part of the country, Milling summed up the apparent goal of Obama's visit.

"It was to let people know that he cares for us," she said. "He gave us hope."

He also gave the Parkway Bakery crew a big surprise; the staff at the 100-year-old neighborhood fixture near Bayou St. John had only 20 minutes' notice that the presidential entourage was heading that way, said Sandra Kruse, the office manager.

Lunch in the crowded eatery went on as usual, and the first family mingled with customers wearing T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops. Children squealed, "I got to shake his hand!" and several patrons embraced him.

"It's an honor to have met the president and his family," Kruse said. "They're so beautiful."

Obama elbowed his way to the window to place the family's order — he got a shrimp po-boy and alligator gumbo — and a few minutes later, a loud voice rang out above the din, "Barack, pickup."

Despite the inundation that the Parkway sustained, it reopened in December 2005.



Enlarge David Grunfeld, The Times-Picayune ELIOT KAMENITZ / THE TIMES PICAYUNE President Barack Obama speaks at Xavier University during a Katrina Anniversary remembrance service on Sunday, August 29, 2010

Xavier's reopening occurred a month later, a feat that Obama cited in his speech.

In September 2005, while the campus remained submerged, Xavier's president, Norman Francis, declared, to some skepticism, that classes would resume in January.

"Some said it was crazy. Some said it couldn't happen," Obama said. "But they didn't count on what happens when one force of nature meets another."

Seven months later, Obama, then the junior senator from Illinois, addressed the largest graduation class — 500 seniors — in the school's history.

That graduation "is a symbol of what New Orleans is all about," Obama said Sunday to loud applause.

"It's a great honor to be back at Xavier," he said. "It's just inspiring to spend time with people who've demonstrated what it means to persevere in the face of tragedy, to rebuild in the face of ruin."

The Obamas' last stop was Columbia Parc, a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Housing Authority of New Orleans. During a light drizzle, the president and his wife strolled through the complex with HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan and Mayor Mitch Landrieu before visiting Maude Smith.

Dressed in a red pantsuit, Smith greeted the couple with a hug and a kiss and said, "I'm so proud to see you."

To prepare for her guests, Smith had set out a chocolate cake and peppermints on a table. When the Obamas sat down to hear Smith's story, they were joined by her grandchildren, David Robichaux Jr., 9, and ShaLynde Smith, 11.

Smith's neighbors lined the hall to shake hands with the first couple on their way to and from Smith's apartment.

*Stephanie Grace contributed to this report.*

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