

A Film Emerges From Katrina's Troubled Waters

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A week before Hurricane Katrina busted the levees and flooded New Orleans, Kimberly Rivers Roberts happened to pick up a video camera on the street for \$20. Then, unable to flee the Ninth Ward as the storm struck, Roberts, then 24, documented the annihilation of her abandoned neighborhood.

"I bought the camera for family parties, you know, although I always wanted to catch something live, like the police beating someone up," she says, three years after the disaster. "Well, I got it, I got something live."

Eventually, she and her husband, Scott Roberts, helped ferry a group of neighbors with a floating punching bag to the high roof of a nearby house and survived -- as did her video. Fifteen minutes of that unique, on-the-ground footage, accompanied by her incisive real-time narration, punctuates "Trouble the Water," a new documentary about Katrina and its aftermath by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal. (The film opens tomorrow at Landmark's E Street Cinema.)

For their part, Lessin and Deal, life partners and first-time feature film directors, track the Robertses for days, months and years after the catastrophe, from Louisiana to Tennessee and back again, their cameras watching discreetly as the Robertses fight not just to survive but to change the trajectory of their lives.

The resulting film is an odyssey of reinvention. By turns uplifting and sobering, the documentary provides a window into the lives of poor black Louisianans in general and an extraordinarily resourceful young couple in particular.

Wielding her camera on foot and by bicycle, Kim Roberts catches her longtime neighbors -- one of whom she would later find dead -- as they react to news reports of the approaching storm. She films the rapidly rising floodwaters, her whimpering pit bulls and the terrified people she gathered in her attic. Sometimes she hopes aloud for God's intervention; sometimes the aspiring musician signs off to the camera with her rap name: Black Kold Madina.

In one particularly disturbing sequence, Lessin and Deal add a soundtrack of 911 calls to Roberts's video. An operator is heard informing a trapped woman that the police will not be venturing into the storm. "I'm going to drown," the hurricane victim says, in a frail voice. "I can't get out."

The personal being political, the documentary also offers an indictment of the Bush administration, the New Orleans city government, the legacy of Jim Crow and decades of institutionalized racism.

Lessin, a former labor organizer who was born and raised in the District, and Deal, a former freelance investigative reporter, both 43, throw the Robertses' deep bond and faith-based optimism into sharp relief by including archival news reports of inadequate responses from Michael D. Brown, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the president, who offers prayers.

"Growing up, I had a lot of faith in the federal government to make things right," says Lessin, whose father worked for the Environmental Protection Agency and whose mother worked for the Justice Department. In an interview at the filmmakers' office near their home in Brooklyn, N.Y., Lessin refers to Katrina as a man-made disaster and derides the "collusion" of various elected officials who ignored New Orleans's weak levees, then failed to rebuild the region.

By contrast, Kim Roberts, who describes herself as a "hustler" who worked minimum-wage jobs and sold drugs to pay the rent, and whose mother, a drug addict, died of HIV when Roberts was 13, refrains from hoping for society's intervention.

"Bush has got to answer to God, that's all I can say," she says.

The documentary, it turns out, began with a providential encounter.

After the hurricane subsided, the Robertses found their way 220 miles north to a Red Cross shelter in Alexandria, La. There, the couple spotted Lessin and Deal's crew; the filmmakers were hoping to document the homecoming of the Louisiana National Guard from Iraq -- or an equally compelling story.

With only a few dollars left and hoping to sell their home video, the Robertses stepped in front of the rolling cameras.

"They were swept off their feet," says Kim Roberts, in a recent interview in Manhattan. "This is a documentary filmmaker's dream, to run across someone like us."

"I knew [the tape] had some value, you know, so I didn't want to get robbed out of it," she adds. "I didn't know to trust them in the beginning because they were white and they were educated about what they were doing more than I was."

The filmmakers, who have extensive producing credits for Michael Moore, later licensed Roberts's video and gave her a director of photography credit; a year would pass before the Robertses would emerge as the documentary's focus. At the time, the two couples headed to the Ninth Ward knowing only that they were going to investigate the ruins, with cameras rolling.

"We had media credentials and a signed letter from the National Guard allowing us access to the city, but we thought we'd be turned away," says Deal. "The Robertses, on the other hand, said they had angels on their side. They were totally confident."

The Robertses' neighborhood was deserted, save for an occasional roaming Guard unit; the filmmakers and their subjects -- likely the first residents to return -- spent five hours exploring a landscape Deal calls "apocalyptic." "Wild dogs roamed the streets," says Lessin. "Dead bodies poked from the rubble."

Scott Roberts, who cannot swim, recalls on-screen how he ventured into the floodwaters after the rains stopped, discovered a rowboat and transported his neighbors -- including a baby and a disabled woman -- to dry ground.

The Robertses then retrace their effort to find shelter for their group of survivors at the local naval base, where they were threatened at gunpoint by the Guard and ordered to leave; the film's credits note that President Bush later commended the soldiers for defusing a potentially violent confrontation.

Occasional moments of joy surface in the documentary: The sole memento of Kim's late mother, a framed photograph, survived, as did the couple's two dogs.

The Robertses remain candid in the film, and in conversation, about their turbulent histories. "The mistakes of my past do not define my future," says Kim Roberts.

She's matter-of-fact about her tenacity. "I've been saving myself my whole life," she says, emphasizing her long "personal relationship with God" and her habit of "paying attention to life, the way things go." Roberts adds that watching her celluloid self instinctively save her neighbors, some of whom "didn't have no love for me at all," was transformational. Why, though, would she help people who had previously shunned her?

"I know how it is to be looked over," she says.

The film comes full circle for the Robertses as they move back to the Ninth Ward. On the first anniversary of the hurricane's landfall, Kim once again takes out her video camera, for a commemorative neighborhood walk. But in a move that she says typifies the hostile relationship between residents and law enforcement, a police officer orders her to stop filming.

Off-screen, the Robertses continue to reinvent themselves. Hours after attending the documentary's January premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, where the film won a Grand Jury Prize, Kim gave birth to a baby, Skyy. With the encouragement of Danny Glover, an executive producer of the film and a longtime community organizer, Scott Roberts, now 33, mentors schoolchildren. "My past being how it was, I didn't know I could do that," says Roberts, who has found steady work as a carpenter.

The couple also created a record label, Born Hustler Records, and last month released a CD of Kim's music.

During filming, however, Kim initially kept silent about her recordings, which she mistakenly believed had perished in the flood.

One of the documentary's strongest moments, then, arrives in the form of a rousing, impromptu performance of her song "Amazing," which she wrote three years before to jolt herself from hopelessness.

Miles from home, with her future unknown, she sings:

I've been picked up and let down

but I bounce right back.

I've got some soldier war wounds

from being under attack.

I've been in some situations

where y'all wouldn't come back. . . .

I don't need you to tell me that I'm amazing.

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