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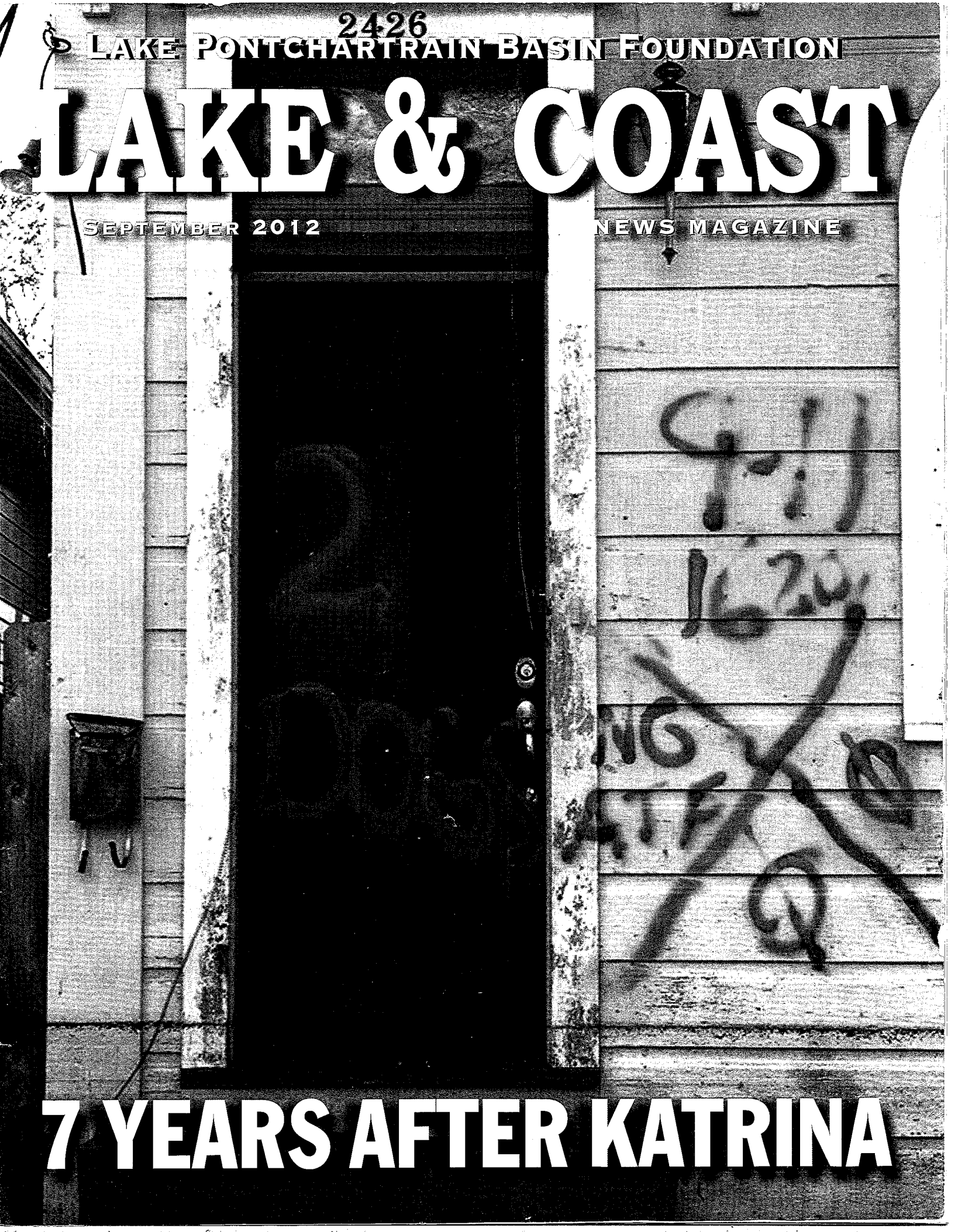
LAKE PONTCHARTRAIN BASIN FOUNDATION

LAKE & COAST

SEPTEMBER 2012

NEWS MAGAZINE

7 YEARS AFTER KATRINA



WE ARE THE WATER

THE STRANGE JOURNEY OF SWIMMING ACROSS LAKE PONTCHARTRAIN

By Matthew L. Moseley

The clouds were opening just after midnight when I climbed into the dark waters of Lake Pontchartrain on the North Shore at Bayou Castine in Mandeville, Louisiana. My stomach was in knots because I knew the sky wouldn't be clear for long as we headed for New Orleans.

I was swimming the first half of what would become a 26.1 mile crossing to raise money to rebuild the lighthouse and to raise awareness about the water quality and ecological habitat for Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation (LPBF). We wanted to show that the lake was swimmable and have a good time while doing it.

Before the swim that afternoon and evening, winds were blowing at 10 to 15 knots and Captain Allen Buras, an experienced bar pilot and long-time friend, said it wasn't going to get any better. At our team dinner my swimming partner and cousin, Glynde Mangum (Mango), and I actually called it off because we didn't want to put anyone in danger, including ourselves. We both have families back in Boulder, CO. Let's just forget the swim and go to Jazz Fest we reckoned.

However, following dinner we went for a small boat ride on the Tchefuncte River. The weather felt nice and calm. Forgetting about the swim wasn't so easy.

After the boat ride, Mango and I told Captain Allen we were ready



PHOTO BY JOHN LOPEZ

From left to right standing: Tom Giovagnoli, Captain Allen Buras, Spencer Hawkins, Sky King, and Leonard Armijo

Swimmers: Matthew Moseley, Glynde Mangum

to go if he was. We could always pull out if the weather was too bad. Within an hour, we were out of the house and heading towards the boat ramp—so nervous I felt like hurling.

Touching the water, I calmed down and focused on what lie ahead. I quickly reached mile three then four and tried to find an illusive groove with my stroke amidst waves of two and three feet. But I knew we were making headway in the rough waters and that gave me confidence. As a swimmer and boater, you soon learn Lake Pontchartrain is actual-

ly like a giant, shallow tea saucer where even small winds kick up a chop that splashes and crashes against itself—not at all like the predictable swells of an ocean.

I swam on through the night rolling on to mile six and seven with five-foot swells sometimes crashing over the sides of the support boat. Easterly winds pushed me towards the Causeway. This was not at all how I had envisioned it; but in long distance swimming, one must expect the unexpected. I asked for this adventure and now I had to live with it.

At one point I looked around



PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT MOSELEY

Swimming Lake Pontchartrain

and I had lost the boat—and I knew they couldn't see me. Like an unseasoned water dancer, I lifted my leg as high as I could in the air where a bright red light was secured in a plastic Ziploc bag and duct-taped to my ankle. This was a critical piece of planning because without it we would have had to cancel the swim. Captain Allen saw the beacon from the boat and was soon right by my side.

About every 20 minutes the crew and our EMT/Nutritionist, Leonard Armijo, would prepare a "feeding stick" with a net that held a bottle with two chocolate gels mixed with water or a lemon electrolyte mix. Once during a feeding

the stick hit me in the face; and it was difficult to take in nutrients with waves crashing all around, poor vision and low-level nausea. However, keeping on top of nutrition was critical to the success of the journey.

Some old-timers have fond memories of Pontchartrain Beach as an oasis where families would swim and picnic. We had previously swam smaller loops twice before from the lighthouse in 2009 and 2010 with late bluesman Coco Robicheaux on our support boat. He remembered seeing Elvis Presley play. But those memories were washed out by a different reality as the water became toxic and

eventually unswimmable.

Yet here I was at about 3:00 in the morning somewhere around mile eight and I knew the nearly full moon was about to set behind the earth's horizon. All night it had been playing hide-and-seek with the storm systems and casting beaming rays of orange moonlight onto the lake. The moon set at 3:20 am, and the water became even more turbulent. We were now tracking the Causeway—over a mile off course. I thought about how I could have used a working lighthouse on this dark night.

At some point before sunrise around mile nine or ten, I stopped

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swimming and told the crew to quit taking pictures because the flashes were bothersome. The bursts were lightening and not from cameras, they yelled back. Captain Allen said I could get in the boat or I could continue. If I got in the boat we would all still be in the middle of the lake in lightening. I might as well keep swimming, I thought, and I put my head down and tried not to think about it.

Swimmers Glynde Mangum and Matthew Moseley pictured with Sheila Englert.



Finally after sunrise my crew-pointed to the halfway point on the Causeway where my cousin Glynde Mangum would jump in to swim the second half.

After 6 hours and 22 minutes of swimming, I saw Mango dive in towards me. We clasped hands, said a few quick words, and he swam away. As I got in the boat the crew noticed that I was blue from lack of circulation and the exertion.

Mango swam on and I recovered in the back of the boat on a little pad, a sleeping bag, a few

blankets and pillows augmented by our gear bags. Mango had tried to sleep on it through the night but to no avail. Leonard, handed me a phone with my wife on the line. She had received hourly updates from him throughout the night. In addition to Leonard, on the crew were my swimming coach Sky King and Spencer Hawkins and our social media maven Tom Giovagnoli.

We kept running into little squalls. At one point, Captain Allen turned around towards us

and said that we had about four minutes until the next storm hit to secure everything. He was exactly right on. We huddled under rain gear and Mango kept on swimming.

The Times-Picayune called Leonard and wanted to send out a reporter, but they couldn't get out because of a Small Craft Advisory. The Coast Guard came out to pay us a visit, however. All they wanted to see were our life jackets, and they failed to notice the swimmer on the starboard side. There would be no escort or sympathy for tired

swimmers in turbulent waters.

Even in a thumping downpour that had closed Causeway traffic, Mango finished strong in just under six hours and a big smile as always.

The chop may have been tough, but the water quality itself was just fine. The only reason the swim was possible is because of the efforts of LPBF to restore the water quality, which was pure as peach. Coco Robicheaux even made Bloody Marys out of Lake Pontchartrain water during our first swim. (Please don't try this at home.)

During my swim I thought how in the open water we become a part of it. We are descendants of the fish. Ancient. Pure. And just like the fish, we are the water.

During my swim I thought how in the open water we become a part of it. We are descendants of the fish. Ancient. Pure. And just like the fish, we are the water.

As the story of Lake Pontchartrain goes, so does the story of New Orleans and the whole Gulf Coast. We are inextricably linked. Let the New Canal Lighthouse shine on a thriving and healthy lake and be a beacon for the resilience of the people of New Orleans.

Matthew Moseley is a communications strategist and author who was born in New Orleans but now lives in Boulder, Colorado.