The Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans: vestiges of a neighborhood

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THE LOWER NINTH WARD, NEW ORLEANS:
VESTIGES OF A NEIGHBORHOOD

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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by
Adam N. Hess
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ABSTRACT

*The Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans: Vestiges of a Neighborhood* is a photo-documentary of the remnants of one of America’s most unique and culturally distinct neighborhoods. Three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated this neighborhood, it lies in ruin, slowly returning to nature. All that remains of the community that once occupied the Lower Ninth are the dilapidated buildings, the crumbling homes, and the small possessions left behind.

For the past three years I have explored the Lower Ninth Ward, discovering the remains of a community rich in tradition, family, and religion. Through the use of black and white photographs and the panoramic format, the tragic landscape and the broken architecture come together to give a greater perspective of the fragile state of the neighborhood. In this past year I have created a portrait of this neighborhood, to serve as a memorial to the loss of the Lower Ninth Ward community and as a means of preserving what is left.
INTRODUCTION

Located east of downtown New Orleans, five miles from the infamous French Quarter, is a small neighborhood known as the Lower Ninth Ward. In August 2005, this community became a mere ghost of itself as a result of the wind and water from Hurricane Katrina. Not one house was spared damage in the Lower Ninth Ward and not one family was spared displacement. When the chaos settled and the water receded, it became clear that this unique and culturally rich community had been thrown into tragedy and was at risk of vanishing entirely.

For generations photographers have been drawn to scenes of tragedy and deep suffering. During the Crimean War in the mid 1850’s and subsequent wars, photographers went out to report on the horrible truths of warfare, as Matthew Brady did during the Civil War. The photographers of the Farm Security Administration projects such as the works by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans during the 1930’s and 40’s wanted to make a difference by reporting on the increasingly poor population of America and the effect poverty was having on people. More recently, after the September 11th attacks in 2001, photographers such as Joel Meyerowitz made their way to New York City for a chance to document a major disaster that killed thousands of people. At the core, photographers seek these tragedies as a means to comprehend them through photography and report their findings to the world.

In January 2006, I made the first of what would become many photographic trips to New Orleans, concentrating on the Lower Ninth Ward. What began as
curious investigation became an in-depth documentation of an American neighborhood struck by a major catastrophe. Over the past three years I have traversed the Lower Ninth Ward, photographing a neighborhood that was at first destroyed, and later, left to deteriorate. All that is left of this once diverse community, rich in family, religion, and tradition, are the remnants of the homes, churches, and possessions left behind. The photographs serve as evidence that a community once existed in a place that is now utterly devoid of one. This body of work, comprised of landscapes and still-life images, can be viewed as a portrait of this devastated community.
THE NEIGHBORHOOD

In the 1850’s the city of New Orleans redrew the boundaries of wards in the municipality. The Ninth Ward was designated as the eastern section of the city, between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River. At that time, and continuing well into the 20th century, most of the settlement occurred along the lakefront and the riverbank. In the early 1920’s, New Orleans dredged the Industrial Canal, a major thoroughfare for ships to travel from the Gulf of Mexico to the city’s main port on the western side of town. The canal was set to the east of the city, away from the upper class in Uptown and the popular French Quarter. This canal was the only one that physically connected Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River. The placement of the canal cut the Ninth Ward into two, creating the Upper Ninth Ward to the west and Lower Ninth Ward to the east, of the Industrial Canal. Though both sides of the canal were similar in layout, the Lower Ninth was the section that was decimated by the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina and ultimately suffered from the loss of its residents [Widmer 2007].

Before the 1920’s, this neighborhood was plantation and swamp, but as the industrial revolution took hold of New Orleans, the swamp was filled in and homes were erected. The work on the Industrial Canal brought development to the Lower Ninth Ward, but also cut the neighborhood off from the rest of the city. The land is surrounded on three sides by water; to the east is the Industrial Canal, to the north is a swamp, and to the south is the Mississippi River [see map, Fig. 1]. The Lower Ninth also lies several feet below sea level. In addition to the delicate geography of
the area, the neighborhood suffers from an ineffective drainage system and an arrangement of out-dated and weakly built levees. For precisely these reasons, the land was affordable for the lower classes [Bergal 2007].

When the Great Depression gripped America after 1929, many residents of the Lower Ninth Ward found themselves unemployed and the neighborhood fell into economic despair. However, this had little impact on the growth of the community, its people, and their traditions. Many of the African Americans who originally settled in the Lower Ninth had become homeowners and were starting on their second or third generation in the same house. Family became a focus of life and it was common to find many households of the same family name on the same street. Aunts and uncles lived around the corner from their nieces and nephews, and their grandparents lived up the street. Some families spent their whole lives in the same house with all their relatives living nearby.

In addition to strengthening family values, the growing number of African American residents in the 1950’s in this southern urban neighborhood prompted the creation of several councils and coalitions for the improvement of civil rights and the end of racial discrimination. At this time the neighborhood also consisted of many white immigrant families, however the majority of the area was African American. Activism became a large part of the culture as a result and residents fought for equal rights and for desegregation. Increasingly, the need to take care of each other and to protect themselves from falling further into poverty and crime became central issues in the Lower Ninth [Anderson 2005].
In 1960, New Orleans integrated its schools, a major achievement for the civil rights movement. The McDonogh #19 school, now known as Louis D. Armstrong Elementary, was one of the first schools to open its doors to African American students in the Lower Ninth Ward. Though the school was located in a mostly African American neighborhood, this was the first time the school allowed the African American students to attend classes. Integration would eventually result in the migration of the remaining white population into neighboring St. Bernard Parish and the move towards an all African American neighborhood [Bergal 2007].

The traditions and ethics of activism that were founded in the Lower Ninth Ward in the 1960’s can still be seen in the neighborhood today. The photograph *Alfred C. Lawless High School, Courtyard* [Fig. 2] shows the inside courtyard of another school in the Lower Ninth. Unlike Armstrong Elementary, Lawless High School was unsalvageable following the flood and was never reopened. In that lot, however, the school’s brick walls transmit a message laden with values and morals: Perseverance, Youthful, Triumphant, Honest, Intrepidity, Attitude, Noble, and Superlative. The words were meant to empower and enlighten the students in the Lower Ninth Ward. Unfortunately, Lawless High School was bulldozed recently and those values and morals on the brick walls were erased along with the building.

Throughout their settlement, residents of the Lower Ninth Ward also incorporated their faith into all aspects of life and community. Religious faith became a staple in the community when it was first being settled in the 1920’s, and helped curb the growing violence and crime in the area during the 1970’s through
today. Churches sprang up on practically every block and ranged in size and denomination. The houses of worship also served as social halls and meeting places for the residents, becoming centers of activity in the neighborhood. Unlike any of the other communities in New Orleans and perhaps most of America, family and church were deeply connected [Anderson 2005].

Throughout the Lower Ninth Ward today, examples of the strong connection between family and church are plentiful. In particular, the photograph A Church Among Homes [Fig. 3]. This church does not stand alone in the middle of a large parking lot, as many American churches do. Instead, the church is surrounded by the homes of its parishioners. The church shared a fence, a yard and the plight of its community. In the end, the loss of the churches like this in the Lower Ninth resulted in a loss of a place for worship and faith.

By the 1980’s, deep family roots that had been planted gave way to flourishing family trees. More houses were built, offices opened, and various corner shops established. Isolated from the main land of the city of New Orleans, the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward built a community of their own. Even the neighborhood’s architecture was unique, with many double shotgun houses and small front stoops. These houses were built small to economize on the land available, and because the residents could not afford anything larger. The shotgun houses were constructed to allow for a central breezeway throughout the house, to cool it down during the summer. Houses were also light in construction, and raised on cinder blocks or concrete foundations to let any minor flood water flow under
the house. Flooding was, of course, commonplace in the below sea level Lower Ninth.

A testament to the resilience of the community in the Lower Ninth Ward can also be traced back to the many storms the residents have endured. This neighborhood has flooded many times in the last century, including during the New Orleans Hurricane of 1915, after a breach in the levees along Florida Avenue. In 1965, Hurricane Betsy caused major levee breaches and produced what was considered the worst flooding in the area until Hurricane Katrina. However awful the damage after the storms, the residents picked up the pieces and rebuilt their neighborhood [Bergal 2007].

Today the ruins of houses and buildings litter the landscape of the Lower Ninth Ward. In the photograph *Houses, Side by Side* [Fig. 4], the size and proximity of these buildings can be seen. The small, closely packed homes are now just broken, swollen remnants of their former structures. An open doorway, spray paint on the front facades, and holes in roofs is the way these houses and their absent of occupants speak. As the wood rots and the possessions left inside gather mold, gravity and nature will work together to bury the structures forever.

The Lower Ninth Ward grew to become a rich community of working class African Americans whose values were in family, religion, and tradition. In this neighborhood, poverty met faith, and roots ran deep. To outsiders, the Lower Ninth seemed isolated and unsafe, but to the inhabitants it was a culturally distinct community and, more importantly, their home.
HURRICANE KATRINA

On August 29th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast as a Category 3 hurricane. Although there were several days of hurricane tracking and some early evacuations before the storm hit, the city at large was not prepared for the destruction that would occur. More than fifty levee breaches resulted in a deluge that covered eighty percent of the city. Due to its vulnerable location, the Lower Ninth Ward suffered severe flooding caused by a massive break in the levee wall along the Industrial Canal, by the Claiborne Bridge. When the levees failed, the neighborhood flooded and the water wiped out several blocks, ripping houses off their foundations and tossing cars. Much of the neighborhood was literally destroyed in seconds [Dyson 2006].

This flooding displaced and injured the community in the Lower Ninth Ward like never before. Decades of racial inequality and economic struggles culminated in an utter lack of aid for the neighborhood after the storm, and many residents were left to fend for themselves. Ensuing arguments surfaced over proposals addressing whether or not to raze the neighborhood completely. These proposals met fierce opposition from many of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward who proudly owned the homes that were now destroyed.

By January 2006, residents filtered back to assess the situation and formed coalitions aimed at protecting their community from extinction. In addition to local neighborhood groups, volunteer efforts stepped in to lend further assistance. By early 2006, many believed that neither city, state, nor federal government was going
to help the residents of this community. Instead, the government left a section of an American city to decline into absolute ruin. If not for thousands of volunteers, donations, news stories, and artists creating work inspired by the Lower Ninth Ward, the residents of this rich community would have had no assistance in their efforts to preserve what little was left.

In 2006, I became another one of the many artists that was drawn to New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward. By this time there were already a few books in the makings by photographers that had flocked to the city to take advantage of the widespread devastation and capitalize on exploitive images of a city in shambles. While most of these photographers chose to concentrate on what they saw on the surface, the destruction, I chose to dig a little deeper and find out what was really lost, the community.

Robert Polidori was one of the photographers that arrived in New Orleans just days after the hurricane. His photographs, a catalog of destroyed homes from all over the city, capture the destruction that was seen city wide, but lack any sense of the culture or community that had inhabited the city. Chris Jordan, another photographer who worked in New Orleans after the storm, created compositions of the large mounds of trash and debris that piled up in the city streets. Jordan’s images are even more removed from the displacement of the community, as they only focus on the immense amount of trash created by the hurricane ignoring whom that trash might have belonged to. By reporting on the loss of the community of the Lower Ninth Ward, I manage to separate my work from these others.
DOCUMENTING THE LOWER NINTH WARD

For many years I have been photographing decaying and broken subjects. In Philadelphia, I sought out the older, dilapidated areas of the city to capture the inescapable urban decay that is endemic in most major cities. I have always been visually drawn to the wreckage and chaos of cultural remains. I find beauty in damaged subjects and am intrigued by their history and geography. So when Hurricane Katrina left an immense swath of destruction behind, I knew that I wanted to photograph there.

I moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana on August 11th, 2005, just eighteen days before Hurricane Katrina struck. Although the storm virtually wiped out New Orleans, the impact was felt in Baton Rouge, eighty miles to the northwest. Scores of evacuees, also dubbed “refugees”, made their way into town bringing with them stories of destruction and stories of survival. Soon after the storm, media reports shocked the world by speaking of the dishonorable government response to this disaster and the countless lives that were lost and affected.

From all the media coverage, I knew that the Lower Ninth Ward area was the hardest hit neighborhood, with nearly all the homes destroyed. The only way I was going to believe that such a loss had happened was to see for myself. Before the start of the spring semester 2006, I made my way into New Orleans. This was my first time in the city after the storm as well as my first time in the city ever. The first series of trips I made in January and February 2006 were fact-finding missions. I investigated the destruction, observed the decaying remains, and listened to the
land. The neighborhood was cold, dirty, and in complete chaos; a ghost town. I found it hard to believe that this was a place where a community once existed. As I made my way through some of the main roads, I would see mailboxes with familiar names, and signs handwritten in English, and I was reminded that this was, in fact, America.

As I pulled into the neighborhood for the first time, complete silence took over me. There was no way to comprehend what had happened there and with no one around, I was left on my own to discover the horrible reality of the widespread destruction. All I could think was, “What does this community do now?” I was in a state of shock, a feeling the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward still experience.

As a gut reaction, I started to take pictures of the destruction. I was simply gathering samples, evidence, and proof of the ways in which the houses, cars, and people were displaced. When I got home, all I could do was think - about going back, about investigating, and about documenting the Lower Ninth Ward area. So I returned and recorded many times over the next three years.

From February through July 2006 I navigated my way through the streets and yards of the Lower Ninth Ward. The neighborhood was eerily quiet as there were rarely any people around. The occasional dump truck or pick-up would roll by with piles of debris, and intermittently so would a utility vehicle. I composed images of the scarred landscape, the piles of debris, and the ruined buildings and broken trees. These early still-lifes are astonishing proof of the destructive forces of nature - trees were knocked over, cars were under houses and turned over, and the
homes were pushed together. These photographs are some of the earliest records of the lost community of the Lower Ninth. They are a true representation of the gut reaction many photographers have to times of tragedy, as I had searched for compositions that were shocking and hard to believe.

I chose to continue and photograph in the Lower Ninth only, and document the remnants of that community in particular. As just one small area in a large city, the Lower Ninth Ward symbolized the horror that seized the entire Gulf Coast. The overall loss could not be measured in just buildings and possessions; the profound loss was that of lives and communities. I chose to use black and white film because the neighborhood, covered in all the dirt and sediment from the floodwaters, was mostly devoid of color. Black and white imagery also emphasized the stark and abandoned atmosphere in the area. A revealing photograph that displays this neglected ambiance is Grass in the Road [Fig. 5]. Taken at a very low vantage point, this image’s depiction of one of the deserted and overgrown streets in the Lower Ninth is accentuated by the black and white tones.

As the months flew by, I noticed some obvious changes in the Lower Ninth Ward. By August 2006, almost one year after the devastating storm, residents had started to return, and the huge process of clean up had finally begun. The volunteers of Hands-On New Orleans, Acorn Construction, Catholic Charities, and Common Ground Relief are just a few of the organizations that came to the Lower Ninth’s rescue with wave after wave of helpful Americans set on doing their part. As I saw all these people and their efforts in the area, I knew I made the right choice to
stay in the Lower Ninth Ward and document that neighborhood. There seemed to be something special about the culture of the Lower Ninth that was drawing this attention, and that something had to be documented and protected.

By the time of the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, I was engaging in conversation with the residents and volunteers in the neighborhood and heard first person accounts of the storm, as well as the volunteers’ stories of wanting to come from out-of-state to help. Fascinated by these stories and their authors, I turned the camera on the people. Over the next few months, I created environmental portraits of the residents and volunteers that came to revive the Lower Ninth Ward. I was amazed at the wide variety of people that had come to help clear out homes. Though the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward may have been vastly different from the volunteers, they understood that these piles of inundated churches, schools, and houses, used to be just like their communities back home.

In the summer and fall of 2007 things seemed to change again in the Lower Ninth Ward. The volume of volunteers coming through the area dropped, and even the number of residents appeared to decline. At the two-year anniversary of the hurricane, the neighborhood of the Lower Ninth and the community that had been displaced receded to the back of the American consciousness. Most of the residents intent on coming back had now cleaned up their plot, and what remained in the neighborhood were the rotting, overgrown piles of homes and buildings that no one came back to care for.
THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND THE PICTURES

This body of work, created between the winter of 2007 through the fall of 2008, is a portrait of a community that contains no people, and hints at the vitality and character of this community. The remnants photographed speak of the people and community that once inhabited the neighborhood and give insight to who and what was there. While these photographs do not contain images of people, it remains a portrait of a community and a neighborhood, as the photographs embody the personality of the area.

The ruins of this community resemble ancient ruins from centuries ago. The people are gone and all that remains is the foundation of a home and some pieces of pottery, as in ‘Masterpiece Luxury Homes’ [Fig. 6] and Broken Dish on a Platter [Fig. 7]. From those artifacts, one can start to imagine the community that was once there. Daily life, rituals and religion, and even architecture start to make more sense as each relic is exposed.

In many ways I see the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood as an archaeological site in progress of formation. The vestiges of a once diverse and thriving community are left, and it is up to me, the archaeologist/photographer, to investigate, collect, and summarize my findings. My goal is to recover the personality of the Lower Ninth and speak of its history and its people and their struggles to maintain a community in the wake of a catastrophic event.

At the same time, however, I am not a scientist schooled in archaeology; rather I am an artist responding to a disaster in a major American city. The
community here did not slowly decline centuries ago. Instead, the community was tragically displaced overnight three years ago. While ancient societies could do little to foresee their extinction, here in 21st century America, we could have done much to avoid the destruction of communities like the Lower Ninth Ward. Sadly, the situation has remained the same for the past three years, while the Lower Ninth Ward, and the displaced community, become increasingly lost to dirt, grass, and time.

To create a distinctive portrait of the Lower Ninth Ward I employed a tool that would create panoramic-like images. This frame gave an uncommon and unique vantage point to this neighborhood. The unconventional format, an elongated rectangle, helped create a vast, panoramic view of some of the pockets of this neighborhood. The frame exaggerated the open and empty space in the environment, a result of rushing floodwaters. The frame also gave more information about the environment and context of the remnants documented, and amplified the cracked and broken nature of the architecture, and the community as a whole, as seen in Foundation with Bent Ironwork [Fig. 8].

The panoramic image has been used in artwork throughout time. Cave paintings spanned many feet as they depicted animals and hunters in the fields. Eventually, scrolls and pottery were drawn on a panoramic fashion to tell a story or show a part of culture or a scene of a city. With the invention of photography, panoramic images became the epitome of a beautiful view, as images of city streets and mountain views were captured in a very wide angle. Artists, such as
photographers Eugene Goldbeck and Stuart Klipper, have used the panoramic image to capture a particular world view in a single yet spacious composition [Meehan, 1990].

In some cases, one ‘panoramic’ frame was not enough, and the use of multiple frames was employed. The concept was to take something already cracked and broken, and give it more context and show more of the condition of the land. By putting images together to create longer panoramic compositions, I could achieve a greater perspective and display the neighborhood as a whole. At the same time the fractured nature of the multi-frame compositions is reminiscent of the physical condition of the neighborhood we see today.

_A Panoramic View of the Levee_ [Fig. 9] is composed of four of these panoramic frames put together to create a longer panorama of the area by the levee. By putting these frames together, the end result is like that of the more traditional panoramic images created at the turn of the 20th century with the cirkut camera. Very long and not too tall, this composition mimics the physical dimensions of the levee. However, unlike the pristine panoramic images of Goldbeck, this panorama has been broken into four units, and imitates the broken status of the levee that had caused catastrophic flooding.

Another image that takes advantage of the multi-frame panoramic technique is _Pierre’s Launderette_ [Fig. 10]. This shop in the heart of the neighborhood is in a dire state of neglect. Destroyed by the floods from the hurricane, this building appears to be in danger of collapsing. Composed of three frames, the building’s
condition worsens from right to left. The frame to the right shows the front of the building and a view down the street. The buildings front side looks to be in fair condition, as does the church in the background. Continuing to the middle frame, the building starts to come apart. A large section of the roof is missing and there is a large pile of debris on the sidewalk. The far left frame shows the worst part, the back of the launderette, which has almost caved in on itself. The wide panoramic frames, matched with the dilapidated building façade, describe the tragic tale of this shop. Nothing has been put back together; instead, the buildings fall farther apart.

The panoramic format was used to document some of the churches in the Lower Ninth Ward, and helped to show just how deeply rooted religion was in this community. An example of this is Mount Carmel Church [Fig. 11], which depicts the closed church and the broken landscape around it. The triptych is set up as a cross, with the center image showing cracked pavement leading off into the horizon. On the right side of the ‘cross’ is the church, with its boarded up windows. On the left side of the ‘cross’ is an empty lot, once occupied by a house that most likely belonged to one of Mount Carmel’s parishioners.

There are also many panoramic images of the layout of the neighborhood. The photographs include images of shops and buildings shown with the streets around them. ‘No Looting’ [Fig. 12], featuring the building on Caffin and Johnson Streets, shows the streets on either side of the building, contextualizing its injured surroundings. As in many cases, the damage is not just to this building; other boarded-up houses are in the background. ‘Rebuild or Leave’ [Fig. 13], shows a sign
on a Forstall Avenue telephone pole. Though simple in its composition, this photograph also gives a greater sense of the neighborhood by showing the barren and scarred landscape receding into the horizon.

This image shows another unique trait of the Lower Ninth, its street and posted signs. Many signs, both handwritten and typed, are everywhere in the landscape. In some cases it is difficult to tell whether the sign was posted before the hurricane or after. In the case of ‘Rebuild or Leave’ [Fig. 13], the tone is quite clear, and the sign was posted after the storm. Another example, ‘Masterpiece Luxury Homes’ [Fig. 6], is a bit more subtle. The sign might have been there before the house washed away, or, it might have been put there after. It is difficult to imagine, however, that a resident might actually be trying to sell this property.

With the individual personality of this community exposed through the photographs, a universal sense of a community is also present. Homes, churches, shops, and schools, comprised the Lower Ninth Ward, just like any other American neighborhood. There is a Vacuum [Fig. 14], and a Baby Doll [Fig. 15], which could be found in any home. These images of the Lower Ninth serve as a memorial to this fallen community, and serve as a means to remember the tragic plight the residents suffered. The photographs show the many churches, capture the landscape and the architecture of the neighborhood, and even depict some of the smaller possessions left behind, as in Trophy and Bible [Fig. 16]. However, these buildings and objects are not forgotten; they remain captured by film, and enlarged, as a visual memory.
CONCLUSION

The photographs in this body of work and from the two previous years of investigating and photographing are just the beginning of a larger, and longer documentary of the vestiges of this community. Though my photographs create a greater sense of the community that was displaced from the Lower Ninth Ward, more can be understood over time and through further documentation. As with any documentary, time is the most valued asset. I believe that by continuing to photograph in the Lower Ninth Ward for years to come I can give others insight into a community that is struggling to survive and which might never return.

Though the destruction is what initially brought me down to the Lower Ninth Ward, over time I have developed a connection with this land. I have been in what used to be people’s backyards. I have looked through houses and searched though the parks. I have met the residents and homeowners of the area, as well as the volunteers that came to lend a hand. I have seen the grass grow high on one plot, and be mowed on another. The experiences of the past three years have given me great respect for what this neighborhood once was, and charged me to create photographs that testify to the Lower Ninth Ward’s fascinating, yet disintegrating community.
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Figure 18: Lady by Fence
Figure 19: Intersection with For Sale Sign and House
VITA

Adam N Hess was born and raised in Acton, Massachusetts, a small suburb twenty-five miles northwest of Boston. At the young age of fourteen Adam took his first photography class in high school, using his father’s Pentax SuperME. After completing a bachelor’s degree at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in 2003, Adam made his way to Philadelphia where he would spend the next two years wandering the city streets with his camera. In 2005 Adam and his fiancé Erin left the northeast for the first time and headed south to Baton Rouge to take on the challenges of a master’s program. The two currently reside in a small house in the University Hills neighborhood with their dog, Jake.