

# RISING FROM RUINS

Documentarian Hanson Hosein creates an emotional film about local economics, with New Orleans in the lead role – by Ariella Cohen

The summer Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, husband and wife filmmaking duo Hanson Hosein and Heather Hughes were crossing the United States on a 13,000-mile quest to find out how independent businesses were faring in a landscape increasingly filled with corporate mega-chains. In late July, six weeks before the levees would fail, the couple chose to forgo a planned stop in New Orleans and instead head to Bentonville, Ark., for an interview at Wal-Mart headquarters.

The film that came out of that 2005 road trip – *“Independent America: The Two Lane Search for Mom and Pop”* – would always feel to Hosein like it was missing a chapter.

Last spring, Hosein picked up again, this time leaving his pregnant wife at home in Seattle, and set off on another documentary-minded mission. The goal was to answer the questions plaguing Hosein since 2005: Had the homegrown businesses of New Orleans survived the storm’s blow? Were they back?

The answer is the 71-minute sequel to *“Independent America,”* called *“Rising From Ruins.”* The film was co-produced with Tom Powers of Open Door Co., a Toronto-based production company. Shown to a large audience for the first time on April 1, 2009 at a New Orleans International Human Rights Film Festival screening held at New Orleans Museum of Art, the movie presents the tales of Big Easy entrepreneurs who reopened businesses at a time when hundreds of chain stores—with far deeper pockets—were putting up “for sale” signs.

The film opens with the camera focused on Community Book Center owner and founder Vera Warren-Williams. “Until the lion tells its own story, the tale will continue to glorify the hunter,” she says, her gaze unflinching. The statuesque Seventh Ward community activist reopened her African-American bookstore 15 months after Katrina. Despite the fact that the store’s front windows hadn’t yet been replaced, customers eagerly returned to the longtime community hub.

The African proverb told by Warren-Williams provides the framework for the rest of the film. *“Rising from Ruins”* is a movie about the power of individuals to shape their economy, their community, and their stories. The documentary has no script and no set formal narrative. “I let the story be led by the power and passion of the amazing characters who rebuilt businesses when so many other walked away,” says Hosein. “I didn’t want to get in the way.”

Hosein returned to New Orleans in August of 2008 in order to observe the third anniversary of Katrina, as well as premiere his sequel. The premiere didn’t go as planned, and neither did the film. Hosein flew out of New Orleans before Hurricane Gustav made landfall, but left a handheld camcorder with Dana Eness, executive director of The Urban Conservancy. Upon receiving the footage shot by Eness, he did a final edit of the film. This final version ends with her recording of businesses reopening battered doors after the Gustav scare.

Watching the film months later in the midst of an escalating national recession, it is impossible not to make parallels between post-Katrina New Orleans and the current recession-era state of affairs in places like Las Vegas, which has been hit hard by foreclosures and economic downturn. While New Orleans has remained relatively insulated from the national slowdown, the pictures of abandoned houses and overgrown subdivisions coming out of other cities bears a striking resemblance to pictures of empty, post-diluvial New Orleans neighborhoods. Eness hopes people who watch the footage she shot will see that parallel as well.

“If you think about it, the globalized economy and natural disasters are our two great uncertainties,” she says. “A robust place-based

economy comprised of diverse and plentiful local businesses is your best safeguard against both... In the current economy, we are seeing retail chains like Linens N’ Things close, but we aren’t seeing local stores close. Similarly, [after a storm] we see local businesses coming back first.”

A place-based economy is a system of income production that cannot be outsourced because it is so closely tied to local needs, resources and social networks. This theory spread through the writings of Michael Shuman, author of *The Small-Mart Revolution: How Local Businesses Are Beating the Global Competition and Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age.*

New Orleans chef and restaurant owner John Besh is something of a celebrity convert to the theory. The renowned chef makes multiple cameos in *“Rising From Ruins,”* discussing everything from the rice and beans he served to first responders in the days after Katrina, to the fact that he buys much of the food served at his four restaurants – August, La Provence, Lüke, and Besh Steak – locally, even buying produce from the Viet Village urban farm in eastern New Orleans.

“We have towns and villages all across southern Louisiana who depend on me to buy their food,” says Besh. “What would it do for the local economy if other restaurant groups [bought locally]?”

Indeed, the questions and ideas raised by Besh and others in the film hold deep relevance to the quandary in which America now finds itself. In the past year, people across the country have watched as the mistakes of its largest banking institutions unravel at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars to taxpayers. Mortgages sold for someone in New York by someone in California to someone in Nevada have ruined hundreds of neighborhoods and left the country littered with the weather-treated bones of empty, foreclosed homes. Hosein is optimistic his viewers will catch on to the synergy between the film’s phoenix-like story and the problems of today.

“I hope the economic lesson of the film will resonate beyond Katrina,” says Hosein. “It is a film about self-sufficiency, in light of the fact that the large out-of-town institutions of Washington, D.C. and Wall Street have failed us. Americans are realizing that we can no longer rely on some white knight from outside of the community to help us.”

Hosein lives according to the beliefs he promotes in the film. The British-born son of immigrants from Trinidad began his career in corporate media. He worked at NBC for seven years as a producer and Middle East correspondent, after which he worked as a correspondent for Canadian Broadcasting Company for two years. While working for CBC in a small town in British Columbia, Hosein became close with local entrepreneurs and began to seriously reconsider his corporate path.

“I fell into their religion,” he says, alluding to the almost spiritual belief he holds in the power of localism and small-scale capitalism. In 2003, Hosein left what he refers to as “big box media” to start his own digital film production company, HRH Media. The first feature documentary he produced on his own, *“Independent America,”* was an obvious choice.

“I started interviewing these businessmen about their courage to keep going as big boxes encroached on the landscape,” he says. “I myself was moving away from big box media. Frankly, I hoped a little bit of their bravery would rub off on me.”

Six years later, it seems as if Hosein’s wish has come true. These days, the filmmaker says he is considering taking on Besh’s question of what would happen if people produced and purchased their food locally. Unfortunately for the telegenic New Orleans chef, Hosein wants to set this film in Detroit.

Facing page: Stills from *“Rising from Ruins”*