

# HOPE AGAINST HOPE

Three Schools, One City, and the  
Struggle to Educate America's Children

**SARAH CARR**



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Struggle to Educate America's Children*

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For my parents,  
Elliott and Susan Carr,  
and for the many families whose grace made this possible

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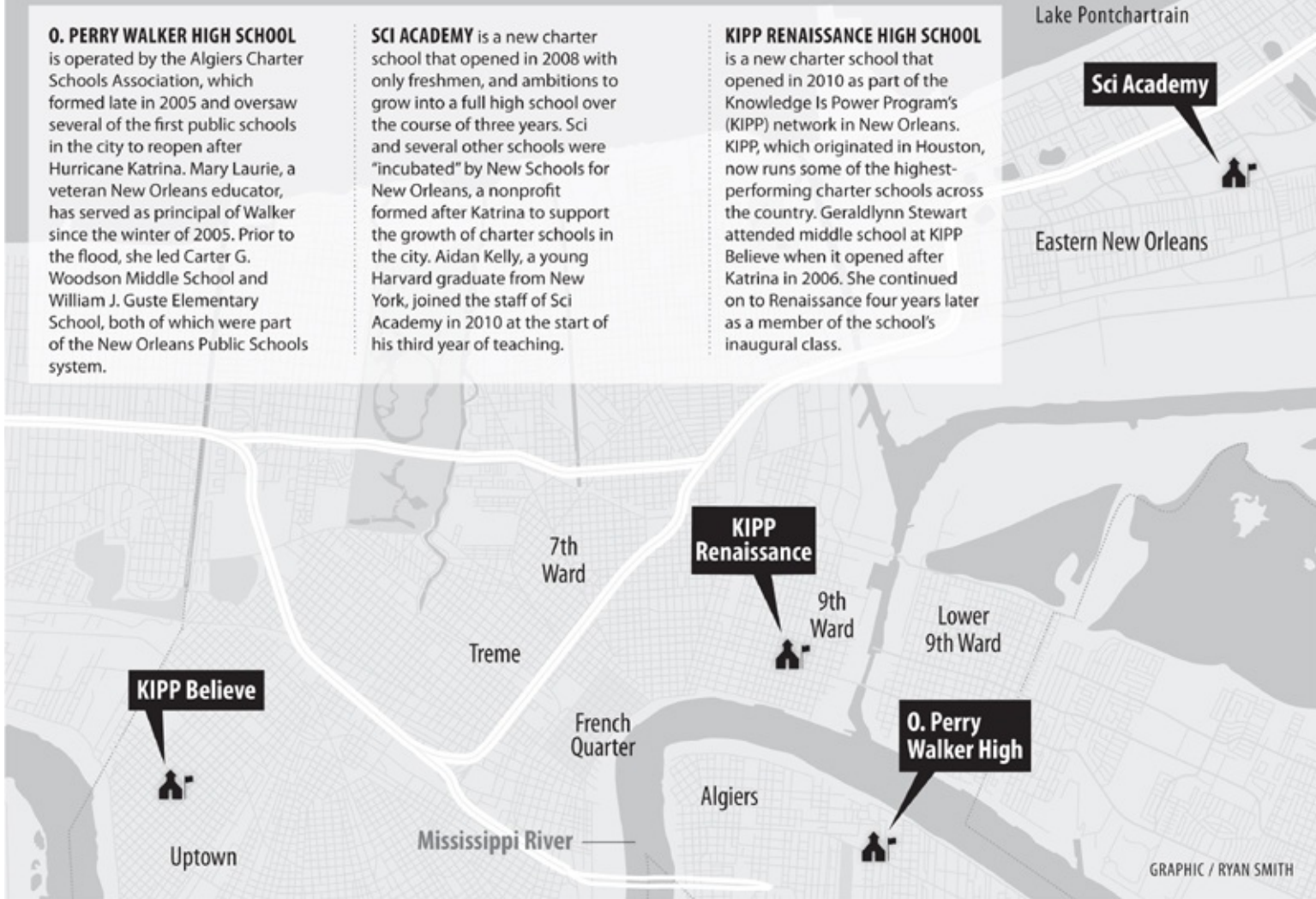
**O. PERRY WALKER HIGH SCHOOL**

is operated by the Algiers Charter Schools Association, which formed late in 2005 and oversaw several of the first public schools in the city to reopen after Hurricane Katrina. Mary Laurie, a veteran New Orleans educator, has served as principal of Walker since the winter of 2005. Prior to the flood, she led Carter G. Woodson Middle School and William J. Guste Elementary School, both of which were part of the New Orleans Public Schools system.

**SCI ACADEMY** is a new charter school that opened in 2008 with only freshmen, and ambitions to grow into a full high school over the course of three years. Sci and several other schools were "incubated" by New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit formed after Katrina to support the growth of charter schools in the city. Aidan Kelly, a young Harvard graduate from New York, joined the staff of Sci Academy in 2010 at the start of his third year of teaching.

**KIPP RENAISSANCE HIGH SCHOOL**

is a new charter school that opened in 2010 as part of the Knowledge Is Power Program's (KIPP) network in New Orleans. KIPP, which originated in Houston, now runs some of the highest-performing charter schools across the country. Geraldlynn Stewart attended middle school at KIPP Believe when it opened after Katrina in 2006. She continued on to Renaissance four years later as a member of the school's inaugural class.



GRAPHIC / RYAN SMITH

## Author's Note

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I have changed the first names of some children to protect their privacy, but no other facts. I witnessed more than half of the scenes. In order to re-create the others, I interviewed at least one person who was present at the time; whenever possible, I tried to interview multiple sources about the same scene or event.

The families and educators featured in the book have all shown remarkable courage in sharing their thoughts and experiences, particularly Mary Laurie, Aidan Kelly, Geraldlynn Stewart, and Raquel Dillon. They have each taught me important lessons not only about education but about the role of race, class, gender, and religion in twenty-first-century America.

I did not select the main characters or school sites to hold them forth as exemplars for critique or emulation. In none of their individual stories can be found a conclusive answer to the challenges facing our cities and their schools, or a tidy prescription for fixing them. I chose the principal, teacher, and family for their singular passion and contrasting backgrounds and convictions in the hope that, considered together, they might defy stereotypes and challenge the simplistic ideology of the day.

Their life stories and experiences in the schools did not always conform to the “script” I had subconsciously expected and planned, however. In that sense, they have already challenged me.

## Prologue (*March 2010*)

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They met in the most neutral site that could be found: a New Orleans funeral home. There, just feet from caskets, urns, and rosaries, two competing visions for the future of America's poor and dispossessed collided.

The issue at hand, a proposal to turn Joseph A. Craig Elementary School into a charter school, drew dozens of parents, children, teachers, and community leaders from the surrounding neighborhood called Treme. At first, the gathering in March 2010 seemed routine and parochial. Teachers came concerned about their jobs. Parents needed to know if Craig would stay open. Neighborhood residents wanted to ensure the school's name remained the same.

The conversation that night quickly devolved into a public battle between two African-American men who, on the surface, had much in common. Both were lifelong New Orleanians who grew up attending the city's public schools. Both stood over six feet tall. Both were community luminaries well-known for their devotion to educating the city's thousands of schoolchildren. And both Jerome Smith and Tony Recasner brought the best of intentions to the meeting at the funeral home that night.

Tony Recasner had the look and bearing of a professor: tall, thin, and bespectacled, with a neatly trimmed mustache and a soft, friendly voice. As children squirmed and Craig's existing teachers looked on skeptically, he described the proposal to turn Craig into a charter school. Craig had been failing Treme's children for decades. It failed to meet minimum standards for academic performance when the Orleans Parish School Board ran it before Hurricane Katrina. And state intervention after the flood did little to change that pattern. FirstLine, the organization Recasner helped create, posted superior results at the two charter schools it already ran in New Orleans.

Recasner, a trained school psychologist, cofounded the city's first charter school in 1998; he hoped the increased flexibility afforded charters would allow him to better serve children. Some criticized him for leaving only one foot in the black community as he allied himself with many white business and political leaders in his efforts to change the education system. Now, four and a half years after Katrina, the movement Recasner had helped start prevailed: A coalition of local power brokers, backed by several of the nation's wealthiest foundations and top politicians, moved quickly to charter the city's schools.

At heart, many of the reformers were technocrats. They believed unelected experts, not politicians should run the schools, and that decisions should be based on science and data, not relationships or tradition. But some of their language was anything but technocratic. They considered their cause the civil rights movement of the twenty-first century and often described themselves as part of "the Movement."

The meeting about Craig's future took place in the Charbonnet-Labat-Glapion Funeral Home, one of the country's oldest black-run parlors. Throughout the 1960s, civil rights leaders met secretly in African-American funeral homes to coordinate their efforts and find common cause. But rapprochement proved elusive that March night a half century later.

With ample knowledge of how quickly New Orleans public gatherings can turn into raucous shouting matches, Recasner tried to keep this one calm and focused on the issues at hand as he fielded questions about class size, teacher hiring, and whether a new Craig would accept children with severe emotional and academic needs. He kept his responses polite but brief. When one woman delivered a lengthy tirade about the quality of special education programs for disabled children at some charter schools, Recasner responded: "At the schools we operate, that would not be your experience."



Jerome Smith took a very different view and approach. Whereas Recasner had a psychologist's conciliatory, gentle-mannered air, Smith brought a preacher's fiery passion. He had been an activist since childhood, risking his life to ride public buses into the Deep South as a Freedom Rider in the early 1960s. During one ride, mobs of white bigots in McComb, Mississippi, used brass knuckles to beat him bloody and near unconscious. He believed in confrontation, tribe, and tradition as devoutly as Recasner favored compromise and pragmatism.

In recent years Smith had devoted himself to protecting modest corners of the Treme, walling them off from interference by the city's white elites or business leaders. In these forgotten pockets, he worked to teach children about the city's black culture. He ran the Treme Community Center, where neighborhood youngsters learned, among other things, about the Mardi Gras Indians: For a century and a half at least, self-described "gangs" of black men in New Orleans toil for months each year sewing elaborate suits of feathers and beads, an homage to the Native Americans who, according to their lore, assisted African-Americans during slavery. The gangs don their suits for a few annual events, including Mardi Gras, where they compete to see whose suit is "prettiest." Smith liked to point out that the men choose to emulate the Native Americans partly because the Indians refused to bow down.

Smith wore his trademark jeans, plaid shirt, and crocheted prayer cap to the funeral home that night. He stood in front of Recasner as he spoke, alternating his comments between general concerns and personal attacks. He decried Recasner's collaboration with white politicians and businessmen, recalling that his own mother would not even let the white insurance collector through her front door. After declaring, "My strength comes from growing up here," Smith, who attended Craig as a child, told Recasner the charter school founder had become a foreigner on the streets of his hometown.

During the meeting about Craig, Smith echoed many of the usual criticisms lobbied against New Orleans charter schools: They don't educate the most challenging students. "Businessmen," "corporations," and "outsiders" run them. Their backers disregard the will and input of the communities they serve. "I am not against charter—it's just a word," he said. "But ... we have to control our own destiny."

Recasner looked Smith in the eye throughout the tirade. He tilted his head slightly every so often as if to acknowledge, yet not agree, with the words leveled at him. Those present sensed Smith's deepest ire was reserved for Paul Vallas, the white school superintendent who had asked FirstLine to take over Craig but did not show up at the meeting. In Vallas's absence, Recasner received the verbal assault.

In the end, many proponents of charter schools felt more convinced than before that opponents like Smith were rabble-rousers who cared more about tradition and control than the quality of schools. In their view, Smith failed to realize their effort was the next stage in the push for racial equality the old Freedom Rider had once led.

Smith's perspective hardened as well. In subsequent conversations he continued to refer to charter school leaders as businessmen. But he added a darker implication as well. The "external management organizations" that run charter schools "are being given access to [school] buildings like it's cargo, like it's a slave ship," he said.

It was an inauspicious way to start, or end, a dialogue: Some viewed turning Craig elementary into a charter school as a victory for the civil rights movement; others likened the prospect to modern-day slavery. The very terms of the conversation incited mistrust.

My thoughts returned again and again to that night in the funeral home as I immersed myself in New Orleans classrooms during the months that followed. The issues the meeting raised became questions asked throughout my reporting and writing: why people with the best of intentions can fight so

bitterly; what principles and beliefs divide them; and how language can push them further apart. The debate over Craig helped frame my understanding of the conflict over urban education in New Orleans and across the country.

Partly because of that evening, I came to view the conflict as less about entrenched partisan politics than competing visions for how to combat racial inequality in America. Those visions, framed initially in the decades after Reconstruction by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, have evolved and shifted over time with the changing context, and it would be facile to argue that a complete personification of either man's arguments exists today. Yet they continue to shape the debate over most of modern America's most pressing social issues, including education, housing policy, affirmative action, welfare, and race relations. According to one vision, which many leaders of the modern education reform movement accept, poor minorities will rise out of poverty and thrive only if they find a way to fit into the country's capitalistic traditions and outlook. This vision, championed initially by Washington, is pragmatic in its approach and puts more emphasis on blacks finding a home in the nation's economic structures than political ones. It prioritizes collaboration with whites, and finding solutions that are acceptable to both races.

The other vision is, like Jerome Smith, more confrontational in its approach. Its adherents do not believe that blacks should try to fit themselves into an agenda defined by white elites. Instead they should set their own agenda, using their own rules, on their own turf. This vision prioritizes political over economic capital, and has helped foster the black power and nationalism movements. It disregards compromise and appeasement under the tenet that what the white power structure deems acceptable—in this case, charter schools—will usually be bad for blacks.

I saw these contrasting ideals reverberate in the hopes and experiences of the people whose lives I chronicled in the schools: Mary Laurie, a veteran principal; Aidan Kelly, a young teacher; and fourteen-year-old Geraldlynn Stewart and her family. Each of them grappled at times with the same tensions over racial autonomy versus collaboration, self-determination versus appeasement, and tradition versus change that formed the basis for the dispute over Craig. But inside the schools, the war over education no longer seems so stark and clearly defined. Edges blur, shades of gray abound, and simple solutions prove elusive.

Unlike most literature about New Orleans, this book focuses on what makes the city ordinary rather than extraordinary.

A majority of the events that have prompted an enduring dialogue on race have transcended a single place and date. They have been epic in scope and sweep: the travails of Reconstruction, the mid-twentieth-century migration of black citizens from the rural South to the urban North, the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, even though it was confined to a specific place and time, briefly seemed as if it too might lead Americans of all colors to see and examine race and poverty in new ways. But like the floodwaters, the nation's attention receded, leaving behind people more conscious than ever of their own fragility, yet uncertain how to feel whole again.

After a time, the fleeting sense that what happened in New Orleans was emblematic of something more universal largely disappeared. If the rest of the country thought about New Orleans at all, it tended to view the city as a physical anachronism at worst, doomed in an era of global warming, receding shorelines, and government budget woes; or, at best, as a treasured cultural outpost deserving of special attention and protection. With so much focus on the city's unique geography and traditions, the country lost sight of how the city's near destruction might carry broader lessons. It lost sight of New Orleans not as an exceptional American city, but as one whose decayed infrastructure,

overwhelmed social services, long-simmering racial tensions, and gross inequities make it perversely American.

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And just as the disaster exemplified our government's widespread failure to protect its most vulnerable, the stumbling recovery of New Orleans can be read as a parable for what happens when well-intentioned, deeply divided people try to make things right. Some of the divide is political. But what separates the staunchest supporters of charter schools from their staunchest critics is often less about contrasting politics than about how our race, class, and differing life experiences shape our beliefs and understanding. It's harder to talk about these divides because we must venture out of political realms and into more personal ones, and the risk of offense rises. Too often we aren't even speaking the same language from the start.

FirstLine's leaders ultimately demurred from doing battle over Craig, saying they would not pursue the school without broad community support. Over the next year, similar scenes and tensions played out repeatedly in the debate over the future of urban schools, both in New Orleans and across the country.

The charter school leaders who followed Recasner in New Orleans—many of them, unlike him, white transplants to the city—encountered the vestiges of a public school system that had remarkably and tragically failed the community for decades in the city's undereducated children. Faced with sixteen-year-olds who could not read or do math at even the most basic elementary level, faced with thousands of students doomed to bottom-rung, minimum-wage jobs or worse, who can blame them for supporting the annihilation of the old system? Who can blame them for seeking a clean slate and a fresh start?

But Jerome Smith and other skeptics had watched time and again as progress for the city's elites and white community led to pain in the black community. They saw a city whose economic survival depended on tourism in a state where many small towns relied on prison jobs. Failing New Orleans public schools supplied a steady stream of low-wage workers and prisoners. For decades they had already wondered: Were the schools set up to fail? And why, if they looked to history as a guide, would this latest push for progress be any different?

Many of the most powerful people in the country have a plan for the future of education in America, one focused on more charter schools, technocratic governance, weakened teachers' unions, and the relentless use of data to measure student and teacher progress. New Orleans offers a test case on an unprecedented scale, of how this vision plays out—of what works, what does not work, and for whom. The debate over urban education in America, crystallized in New Orleans, speaks to broad, deeply rooted tensions in our country over what the civil rights movement should look like in the twenty-first century and who should lead it. It speaks to fundamental disagreements over how the push for racial equality should proceed, at a time when the end goal remains as elusive as ever. And it speaks to a nationwide loss of trust—in our public institutions, each other, and ourselves. At its heart this is the story of one community's painful struggle—in the wake of one of the most tragic disasters in our history—to rebuild that trust.

PART I

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*“The Christmas of school days.” (August 2010)*

Try as she might, Geraldlynn Stewart could not get her KIPP Renaissance uniform to fit. She experimented with safety pins, bobby pins, and tape. She rolled it up at the waist, ran it through the dryer, and eventually just stared at it—willing the skirt to shrink. Geraldlynn went to bed early on the eve of her first day of high school. When her cell phone alarm beeped at six A.M., the house was eerily silent. Her mother had left an hour earlier for the French Quarter hotel where she worked as a housekeeper. Everyone else still slept. The white-and-blue plaid skirt loomed as large as ever.

The ill-fitting uniform seemed to reflect Geraldlynn's misgivings about KIPP Renaissance. In theory, everything the charter school promised sounded great: a warm, supportive atmosphere and an education that would prepare students for college. In reality, however, that meant preppy uniforms, crazy rules, and nights and weekends full of schoolwork. All that to earn four more years of studying? Geraldlynn felt ambivalent. No one in her immediate family had attended college, and despite her good grades in middle school, she remained deeply insecure about her "book smarts." Just weeks earlier, an ACT prep book had arrived in the mail for her older sister, Jasmine. Geraldlynn opened the package and scanned the math problems on one page. Within seconds she threw the book on the floor where it landed with a loud thud.

"I was scared," she said. "I thought, I'm not ever going to be able to solve these."

But Geraldlynn had no choice in the matter—at least when it came to KIPP Renaissance. Her mother had made that clear. "I think she's in love with KIPP schools. She probably will send me to a KIPP college," the fourteen-year-old said. "I been doing KIPP all my life. I might as well just finish with it."

At school later that morning, the students bantered quietly and compared schedules while their principal droned on about KIPP Renaissance's expectations for student behavior:

*"If someone says hello or good morning to you, say hello or good morning back ..."*

"I want to go to sleep—or home."

*"... If you do something you shouldn't have done, then apologize ..."*

"We can't go home. We're stuck here for five years." *"... If someone gives you something you need or ask for, say thank you ..."*

"What's this class on my schedule called CR?"

*"... About forty percent of KIPP Renaissance students said 'thank you' going through the cafeteria line—four out of ten is not a percentage we can be proud of ..."*

"I think that means college readiness."

Everywhere she looked, Geraldlynn saw physical reminders of KIPP Renaissance's overarching goal. College banners draped from the ceiling of the cafeteria. College flags lined the hallway walls. College diplomas hung in the classrooms. Her first day of high school concluded with the mysterious college readiness course, whose teacher, Mr. Saltmarsh, said it would "help us realize our big goal here at Renaissance: one thousand first-generation college graduates by 2022."

Geraldlynn listened closely as Mr. Saltmarsh described Louisiana's college scholarship program, offered full tuition at any of the state's public universities for students who earned a 2.5 grade point average in high school and scored above the state average on the ACT. Geraldlynn had always wondered how she could afford college. The money her mother made cleaning hotel rooms and bus tables barely covered the bills. Mr. Saltmarsh's speech offered a flicker of hope. In eighth grade she had earned mostly As and Bs—well above a 2.5.

But when Mr. Saltmarsh told the class, “If you think you can earn a 2.5 and score a 20 on the ACT please let me know by snapping [~~the KIPP Renaissance sign of approval~~]!” Geraldlynn kept her hand still.

One by one, each student rotated before Aidan Kelly's watchful eyes. He checked for the requisite khaki pants, black Sci Academy polo shirt, black shoes, and belt. He instructed them to take off wristbands, colored hair ties, and necklaces. Then he sent the students on their way. Another teacher escorted to the office the few whose uniforms failed to pass muster, where they secured the missing items. The rest continued on their way to breakfast. To get there they had to walk between two lines of black tape laid out on the outdoor walkway. Sci Academy teachers greeted the students at every turn, scrutinizing the children's comportment. One roll of the eye, muttered complaint, or step outside of the black lines and a staff member descended. The teachers did not want students to see a peer recognized for bad behavior, so they made a point of reprimanding and redirecting the students as subtly as possible. As one teacher put it: "We don't acknowledge things that don't lead us to college."

Aidan's first day teaching at Sci Academy moved with the precision of a military operation. The teachers had devoted several hours of professional development to rehearsing the day's maneuvers again and again. By the time Sci's freshmen arrived for a weeklong orientation, the staff members were able to move wordlessly between their predesignated stations, leaving the stunned students feeling as if they had stepped into an alternate universe, not a high school. After the uniform check, breakfast, and morning assembly, the students learned how to SPARK (S for sit or stand up straight; P for pen to paper and place your hands on desk; A for ask and answer questions with a straight Sci Academy elbow; R for respect at all times; K for keep tracking the speaker). Each letter was the subject of its own ten-minute mini-lesson.

Even on the first day of school, Sci's teachers tried to connect just about every lesson to college: Scholars should sit in SPARK so blood flows to their brains more easily, speeding up their thoughts and facilitating their path to college. Scholars should be able to transition from "silly" to "serious" with the snap of a finger or the clap of a hand because they do not have a second to waste on their path to college. Scholars should wash their hands before leaving the restroom because otherwise they might get germs, which might make them sick, which might cause them to miss school, which would interrupt their path to college.

Aidan, twenty-four, felt at home at Sci, with its clearly defined rules and aspirations. His first day at his previous teaching job at Martyn Alternative School in a New Orleans suburb could not have been more different. He had floundered through the opening days on his own. There had been no school-wide plan, no practice sessions, no guiding philosophy.

Aidan grew up attending rigorous Catholic schools in the New York City area. He gravitated to intense structure. If there was any place he felt he could thrive as a teacher, it was Sci Academy.

His mother taught kindergarten in a Catholic school and his father, an immigrant from Ireland, never attended high school or college. They had always stressed to Aidan the value of an education. He lived up to their hopes as well as his own, graduating from Harvard University, where he thrived amid the veneration for everything academic. Harvard became a proud part of Aidan's identity. Returning to his alma mater brought a unique joy he hoped his students would someday feel. Most of them, however, viewed the Ivy League as a foreign land—out of mind, out of reach, or both—hardly a target of their aspirations. At Sci Academy, Aidan planned to show them just how much was possible.

All day long people brought their children to Mary Laurie.

An O. Perry Walker alum arrived with his daughter in tow. The family had just moved back to New Orleans, and he had heard good things about the soft-spoken principal who ran the school with an iron fist.

A teacher from one of the city's alternative schools showed up with a sullen-looking girl who wore her baseball cap backwards and a T-shirt that read, I LOVE MY RUDE SHAKER BARBIE BRE. He knew Laurie would take in the wayward student just as she had done with so many others.

A nineteen-year-old who looked like a student himself brought his younger brother. He had assumed the role of father after their parents passed away and wanted his brother to attend a school that treated him like family.

On this day, Laurie accepted all the children on faith. More often than not, they lived up to that trust. The proof was all around her.

In the cafeteria she spotted a confident-looking junior wearing the white shirt and orange and navy tie of a student athlete. Just eighteen months earlier, his mother had arrived at Walker sobbing. Her son had recently been arrested for attempted murder and she doubted any school would admit him. "What am I supposed to do now?" she had cried.

Laurie heard the story, saw the electronic ankle bracelet, and agreed to give it a try. Over time the teen thrived at Walker, defying his own stunted ambitions for himself. "He didn't know how good a person he was," Laurie says. "But he could have gone the other way."

Not every story has a happy ending. Laurie knew that all too well. But she pushed such thoughts from her mind today. Even in her late fifties, Laurie still viewed back-to-school season with the hope and excitement of a child.

During the morning, Laurie's pace was relaxed, her exchanges playful. She teased, cajoled, reprimanded, or praised nearly every student she passed as she walked around the worn-down campus. The students called out for her to join in when she arrived in the makeshift dance studio. But Laurie demurred: "I only got one move, one move, baby," she said. "And it was old when I was young."

In the afternoon, however, Laurie's tone grew more urgent and her steps quickened. With just a couple hours before dismissal, several students still awaited schedules or the final paperwork they needed to enroll. They sat in the cafeteria and main office, growing anxious and bored. Laurie wanted them all in class—any class—ASAP. "We're taking too long, get this young man a schedule!" she barked at an administrator. "Come on, baby, let's put you in band for now."

"We've got to move them through, move them through, so they can start their regular classes tomorrow!"

After more than three decades working in schools, Laurie knew that most days would not be like this one. On other mornings, the crowd of devoted parents, grandparents, and older brothers would be gone. So, too, would be much of the energy, the excitement, the sense of possibility and new beginnings. She needed to capitalize on that energy. She had to get the children through the door and into classes while they wanted to be there. Once inside, she hoped they would connect with a teacher, classmate, the feel of a horn in their hand, or the rush of a football practice—before they sought their thrills elsewhere. There wasn't a second to lose.

Some students she might not be able to keep for all the time she wanted. But hundreds of families had brought her their children on what she described as "the Christmas of school days." And Laurie



intended to hold on to them for as long as she could.

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## PART II

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# Rebirth (*Summer 2005–Summer 2010*)

Geraldlynn’s mother, Raquel Dillon, likes to recall the early-summer afternoon in 2006 when good fortune knocked on her door. Neighbors struggled to surmise the purpose of the lanky white stranger who approached Raquel’s shotgun house on Columbus Street. He looked to be in his late twenties and had a ruddy complexion and light hair that curled despite the close crop. Clad in khakis and a T-shirt and carrying a black laptop bag, he did not have the look of a cop. Best anyone could guess, he came to sell flood insurance, or point residents in the direction of nearby mobile food vans. It seemed implausible that anyone too important would make a personal visit to the home of a hotel housekeeper and short-order cook at a time when even the city’s most powerful residents jockeyed for attention from officialdom. Nine months after Hurricane Katrina struck, the area’s black population slowly trickled home. Raquel’s neighborhood in the city’s 7th Ward hadn’t started to gentrify like some other areas, so it seemed unlikely the visitor lived nearby.

Adam Meinig, the lanky stranger, viewed his mission as finding those families most neglected by the city’s leaders and institutions. That winter and spring, the Colorado native met with newly returned families in motel parking lots and on the floors of gutted homes, pitching a new middle school he planned to open that August. It wasn’t a hard sell, even though Meinig brought only his word and a clip from an Oprah episode touting his program, part of a national chain of charter schools called KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program). Meinig would be principal of one of the first two KIPP schools to open in the city.

As the steamy afternoon turned into evening, Raquel sat on the brick steps in front of the green door leading into her house, talking with Meinig and her two daughters. On first glance, the whole family could have passed for schoolchildren. The girls had inherited their mother’s petite stature and features. Raquel, who was in her early thirties, stood just under five feet tall and weighed about one hundred pounds. Sometimes strangers and acquaintances underestimated her as a result. But her small stature and surface timidity belied an exceptional strength of character and capacity for spirited resistance.

Geraldlynn, ten years old at the time and the target of Meinig’s visit, could tell he was a stranger to the 7th Ward, and probably New Orleans, based on his accent. He caught her off guard when he started grilling her with questions.

*“What do you want to do when you grow up?”*

*“What kind of education will you need?”*

*“What year will you go to college?”*

*“Do some math and answer with conviction, like you know it’s true:*

*WHAT YEAR WILL YOU GO TO COLLEGE?”*

Geraldlynn spent much of the conversation fretting about her hair—a hot mess after hours of playing in the humid streets. She liked Meinig’s slow cadence, though, and his tendency to repeat himself, since distractions like a screeching car alarm punctuated the conversation. Geraldlynn perked up when Meinig described annual school trips to cities like New York. But he lost her interest when he mentioned the school hours: seven thirty A.M. to five P.M., plus Saturday school.

Her mother appreciated Meinig’s detailed plans, including the longer school day and the thorough description of classes. It sounded better than the school Geraldlynn had attended since the family returned from Houston just months after Katrina. At James M. Singleton Charter School, Raquel

overheard young students cursing out the teachers when she visited, and Geraldlynn never once brought home homework. Meinig's questions evoked an ambition Raquel had rarely heard voiced by her own teachers in the 1980s and early 1990s, or her two daughters' teachers in the years leading up to Katrina. Moreover, no one else had knocked on her door asking permission to teach Geraldlynn. Compared to the hell of evacuating a flooded city, the heartache of missing home, and the frustration of restarting her family's life there, saying yes to Meinig seemed so easy. So when he asked mother and daughter to sign their commitments to the KIPP regimen—of which Raquel had a good first impression but fuzzy understanding—she unhesitatingly agreed.

“Sometimes,” she recalls, “you have to give a person a little bit of trust.”

Unbeknownst to Raquel and thousands of other public school families, officials took a series of actions in the wake of the flood that would fundamentally alter nearly every aspect of the city's education landscape. Critics called the changes disaster capitalism at its most flagrant. Supporters called it the flood's only silver lining. The story that unfolded complicated both assertions.

In September 2005, just days after the flood, the school board placed its thousands of employees on unpaid leave. Three months later it effectively voted to fire them, a controversial step that provoked years of tense litigation and helped lead, over time, to a significant expansion in the number of educators recruited from out of town. In November, the state legislature removed most of the city's public schools from the control of the locally elected school board and placed them in the Recovery School District. The state never planned to run schools in the long term, however. Instead, key officials intended to turn them over to charter operators.

Those actions effectively stripped both the locally elected school board and the teachers' union of their authority, paving the way for an unprecedented remaking of an urban school system.

The principles of the New Orleans school overhaul do not differ significantly from those guiding school reformers across the country. Most of them sought and still seek to reduce the power and influence of elected school boards and teachers' unions through the proliferation of charter schools (which have their own boards and tend to hire nonunion teachers), mayoral control or state takeovers (which often strip the elected boards of any real power), and efforts to make teaching more akin to a private-sector profession (where employers have increased control over whom they hire and fire and employees are more accountable to a bottom line, in this case, test scores).<sup>1</sup>

But in New Orleans, the changes happened virtually overnight.

Most poor residents like Raquel and her family heard nothing when the state legislature approved the measure that seized nearly all of the city's public schools from the elected school board. They never received word of the school board's vote to fire its teachers. They knew little of the charter schools that sprouted across the city, or what would distinguish them from the schools of their youth. New Orleans grew into a mecca for supporters of a parent's right to choose from an array of schools. But ironically, the new landscape originated in a series of actions more characteristic of a despot.

It is a testament to Raquel's calm temperament, and to her disenfranchisement, that she never expected to be consulted, or even notified, of the changes that would alter the course of her daughters' education. She and her husband, Langdon, noted quite pragmatically that it would have been difficult to gather all the public school parents together in one space in the months after Katrina, much less get the word out about a meeting. They felt grateful Meinig had stopped by that summer day.

The officials who sought a complete overhaul of the New Orleans education system in the flood's wake marshaled plenty of evidence to support their case: the failure of nearly two thirds of the schools to meet the state's minimum criteria for academic performance; the school district's impending

financial ruin; nearly \$70 million in federal money not accounted for properly; the FBI investigators who moved into the school system offices to probe financial irregularities; crumbling facilities where hallways smelled of urine; the near complete abandonment of the public schools by the city's middle and upper classes and the shocking disinvestment of those with power and money that ensued; the frustration and anger of many of those left behind; and the undervalued children who, taking stock of it all, not infrequently gave up.

Over time, two opposing narratives explained the schools' failures. One held that the traditional school system was inherently flawed, its structures—a centralized bureaucracy, democratically elected school board, and empowered teachers' union—outdated and its foundations rotten. Others countered that the system had been set up to fail: Politicians and the public had starved the schools of the support and money needed to thrive after the city's white families decamped for private and suburban schools. But, they argued, the system's foundations remained solid.<sup>2</sup>

Diagnosing the problems proved simpler than explaining the causes, however. Politicians and citizens grandstanded about white racism, the breakdown of black families, the selfish oblivion of the business community, or the intransigence of the teachers' union. More thoughtful observers hesitated to parse the causes of the troubles in New Orleans schools too neatly. Those who sought the educational overhaul loved to tell the story of the pre-Katrina high school valedictorian who could not pass the state exit exam after multiple tries. But had the system failed her because of low expectations? A racist school accountability structure? Burnt-out teachers? Decades of damaging underfunding? Or some combination of them all?

For most of Raquel's life, and all of her daughters', the United States has been confronted with diminishing economic mobility and worsening inequality. She grew up in a change-averse city marred by these trends well before Katrina's devastation. Since the late 1970s, income inequality rose across the country. In the twenty-five years before Katrina struck New Orleans, more than 80 percent of the total increase in income fell in the hands of the richest 1 percent of Americans. A 2008 report by the United Nations found that New Orleans and a handful of other American cities suffer from the same level of inequality as African cities.

Meanwhile, Louisiana has never been known for liberal social services or for its ministrations to the poor. Since Raquel's first daughter, Jasmine, was born in 1995, the welfare rolls fell by 61 percent nationally. In Louisiana, they dropped by more than 86 percent. Comparatively speaking, New Orleans families like Raquel's have not relied on government aid for both practical and philosophical reasons. If unemployed, Raquel could receive a maximum of \$284 a month in cash assistance from the state for herself and her daughters, one of the lowest rates in the country and hardly enough to pay the bills. Instead poor New Orleans families have gotten by—or not—by working low-paying, nonunionized jobs in the city's large service industry: myriad hotels, bars, restaurants, and a casino. Particularly before Katrina scattered much of the city's population, they also benefited from strong ties to community, neighborhood, and family that provided an alternative safety net of sorts. After the hurricane, countless grandmas, grandpas, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunties, and cousins never moved back to New Orleans. That meant those who did return had fewer relatives and friends to turn to if they needed emergency child care, could not pay rent for a couple months, or lost their homes and possessions in a fire.

In the last quarter century, America has invested in single-pronged, isolated strategies to curb poverty, such as school and welfare reform. Critics have described them as so-called silver bullets that overlook poverty's many dimensions and manifestations, while defenders have called them politically pragmatic and shrewd. In the 1990s, the government tried to overhaul welfare by placing women in

job-training programs and helping them to find work, but undertook few other reforms to assist them. By contrast, the British government under Tony Blair unleashed a series of changes aimed at reducing child poverty. The changes, modest by European standards, not only focused on pushing welfare recipients into jobs. They also instituted the first national minimum wage (at a higher level than the minimum wage in America), provided generous new tax credits for working families, expanded free preschool programs, and extended paid maternity leave.

The effort to reinvent New Orleans after Katrina offered no exception to America's targeted, one-dimensional approach to poverty. Raquel and Langdon saw no significant change in their working conditions, pay, or access to health care and social services in the months and years that followed the return to the city. They had not expected anything better, though, and returned because, as Raquel put it, "when you're used to home, you're used to home." But any changes were for the worse, like the cuts to holiday pay rates at the hotel where Raquel worked; the closure of Charity Hospital, which ministered to the poor; or the steep hike in the city's average rental costs, which priced the family out of most houses and, for a time, the city itself.

Katrina struck the Gulf Coast at a time when the digital age had simultaneously eroded traditional lines of authority and, some argued, laid bare the shortcomings of American institutions across the country. Since its inception, the American public education system has struggled to educate the poor—at times scarcely attempting it. But that was never so evident as after the turn of the millennium, when No Child Left Behind required the public release of data showing just how well (or not) the nation's public schools did by poor students, rich students, white students, black students, Hispanic students, Asian students, disabled students, rural students, urban students, and suburban students—at least on the single matrix of an annual standardized test. Of course the government did not try to reduce to a single number or grade the quality of a child's health care, diet, home environment, peers, community resources, recreational options, or parents. So in some eyes the blame for the dismal results posted by many poor minority students fell largely on the schools.

At the same time, the Internet collapsed long-established hierarchies relating to the media and where to turn for information and expertise. For better or for worse, the structures and institutions that had come to define America no longer seemed so sacrosanct. The state officials who pushed through the changes in New Orleans tended to justify their actions with specific outrages: the FBI investigations of school district finances, for instance, or that endlessly repeated story of the high school valedictorian who couldn't pass the state's exit exam. But they operated in the broader context of a country whose citizens felt newly emboldened to question what had been taken for granted—particularly when it came to the fundamentals of the nation's largest public institution. The reinvention of New Orleans schools was an extreme example of the growing and controversial conviction that a changed educational structure on its own could be used to combat poverty in America. Under this line of thinking, "fixing" the schools will best alleviate poverty, not a more expensive and complicated blend of welfare reform, housing reform, health care reform, criminal justice reform, higher taxes, and increased government spending.

Unlike most of those who publicly debated the radical changes, Raquel did not view what transpired through the prism of ideology or politics or public good. She viewed it—at times approvingly, at times more critically—through the lens of personal need.

Raquel and Langdon, Geraldlynn's stepfather, had few fond memories of their own time in the New Orleans public schools. By the end of the 1970s, when they started kindergarten, white and middle-class flight were well under way. When they left high school, most of the city's more than one hundred public schools enrolled low-income, black student populations. The schools suffered from

gross neglect when it came to resources and facilities, a neglect many attributed to the race and poverty of their students.

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Langdon, smart and intense, loves to hold forth about the value of an education—using his own miseducation and subsequent struggles as testament. He often tells his children and stepchildren that his alma mater, James Derham Junior High School, was “the baddest school they had for little kids” in the city and Booker T. Washington, his high school, “the baddest school they had for big kids.”

“We had dudes bringing guns and knives to school every day. Every day,” he says, recalling his experience at Booker T. Washington in the late 1980s. The school drew many of its students from nearby housing projects. But weapons and violence did not make the school bad on their own, according to Langdon. He also cites a dangerous neighborhood, lack of parental support, negative public perception, and teacher apathy.

Langdon never knew his own father. And he did not know what to believe from the myriad accounts he heard of why the state took him from his mother. He lived with one foster mother until the age of eight, a woman who “treated me like a normal child.” But when she died, the state sent him to a series of group homes that left him with a never-ending supply of *Oliver Twist*-style tales for his children and stepchildren: birthdays and Christmases with no presents, a home life spent sitting in a locked bedroom with three other foster boys, the time a group-home staff member punished a boy by putting a pair of pliers around his genitals and threatening to cut them off if he misbehaved again. When Langdon held forth, no one knew quite where fact ended and fiction began. But they understood his message: Growing up on your own, without parents who cared about you, wasn’t anything pretty.

When Langdon was twelve his oldest brother, Tyrone, pulled him out of the group homes. Tyrone was a solid role model, but he grew so frustrated with his little brother’s disobedience after a year that he sent Langdon to live with another brother, Levett, in the St. Thomas housing projects. Levett did not set a good example. While living with him, Langdon started to sell drugs, commit robberies, and avoid school. By the end of his sophomore year, he had dropped out.

Langdon sometimes wonders if more involved teachers could have filled at least part of the parental void. The teachers “didn’t care if you did the work as long as you sat there and kept quiet. They didn’t care unless you aggravated them,” he said.

Raquel knew teachers weren’t solely to blame for a school’s troubles. When she attended New Orleans’ Cohen High School, a lone student or small group disrupted many classes. By the time the teacher calmed those students down, or kicked them out, the class had ended. She thought most of the teachers were overwhelmed. Raquel still remembers a few who took time out and treated her like a daughter (as an adult she spent hours searching for one of them online to offer thanks). But others, defeated and resigned, wrote the material on the chalkboard before class started and then spent the rest of the period behind their desks. “They’d be like, ‘Do this and call me when you are done.’ Sometimes I’d look up and they be sleeping, so I’d go to sleep, too.”

Raquel graduated from Cohen in 1992 and headed straight into a series of low-paying jobs: preparing sandwiches at Subway, working in the food court at Tulane University, cleaning hotel rooms at the Sheraton. She tried working for a temp agency but did not know what she was supposed to do a half of the assignments. Raquel received government assistance and food stamps for a brief period when her daughters were young. At one point the public assistance office assigned her to a job in a check-cashing storefront as a condition of receiving money. Another time they referred her to an unemployment agency that then dispatched her to a strip club in the French Quarter. Raquel had had enough. “I was so mad. Here I am thinking it was a real job,” she said. “I was like, ‘Uh-uh, I can find my own job.’ “

She found work cleaning rooms at a French Quarter hotel instead, a job that has provided most of her income over the last decade. At the hotel, Raquel sees all sides of humanity: guests who tip well and bring gifts to the staff each time they visit, and ones who, trying to dodge the bill, swipe a stick of red lipstick across the sheets and then blame it on the maid.

For the first decade of her life, it seemed as if Geraldlynn would receive a similar education as her parents—although with more encouragement from home than her stepfather received. Her schooling got off to a rocky start at McDonogh 42 Elementary School in the Treme, where she attended kindergarten through fourth grade. She hung with a group of girls who liked to squabble more than study. She often told teachers she had to go to the bathroom, then cut class. If caught, she tried to skip out on detention. Her report cards were full of Cs and Ds. Geraldlynn never caused serious trouble, however; she drew the line at certain kinds of mischief, like pulling the fire alarm over and over again.

Geraldlynn knew from her first day of fifth grade that Adam Meinig's school, KIPP Believe College Prep, would be different. The school's rules made her dizzy: no talking in the hallway, no going to the bathroom between classes, walk on this side of the hall, snap your fingers to show agreement or approval, "track" the teacher or student speaker at all times. In math class that first morning, a teacher fussed at Geraldlynn because she had not participated enough and fell asleep in class. Skipping class, much less detention, clearly wasn't going to be an option.

Geraldlynn quickly learned about the Bench, the bane of every KIPP student's existence. Students who seriously violated one of the school's six values—responsibility, perseverance, integrity, empathy, courage, and community—found themselves isolated from their peers in classrooms and at lunch. They also had to cover the KIPP name on their uniforms with a piece of tape or a jersey, a symbol of their temporary estrangement from the school community. The humiliation underlying this controversial approach dismayed many parents, particularly middle- and upper-class ones. But it resembled Raquel's own discipline strategy. She often told Geraldlynn and her older sister, Jasmine: "I send you to school to do what you need to do and get out of there. If you cut up, you're embarrassing me, and that means I'm going to embarrass you right back."

"My mama take after my grandma's kind," says Geraldlynn. "She don't play. She'll knock me to the next century if she has to."

Every so often Geraldlynn found herself benched, usually for failing to do her homework or talking back to a teacher. Geraldlynn did not agree with her mother as to the Bench's merits, but she did appreciate her teachers' hard work and the extra effort they seemed to take with students. KIPP Believe teachers gave each student their cell phone number and called parents often. (Raquel always knew someone from KIPP was calling when a strange area code appeared on her cell phone.) One of Geraldlynn's favorite teachers, Ms. Drake, invited a small group of girls over to her house to bake cookies and took Geraldlynn out to lunch. Raquel viewed the small fleet of earnest teachers as collegial kids imported from across the country to help New Orleans schoolchildren after Katrina. It was only a slight misperception, as most of Geraldlynn's teachers weren't long out of school, and many were not from New Orleans.

Geraldlynn's grades improved each year at KIPP Believe, to mostly As and Bs in seventh grade. It helped that she stopped hanging that school year with two girls who always seemed to be in trouble. One had to repeat a year, and the school expelled the second (or "put her out") for repeated fighting. Without their distractions, Geraldlynn could focus on her work.

Her honor-roll grades held steady during her final year at KIPP Believe. Eighth grade culminated in the excursion Meinig had touted that afternoon on her front steps four years earlier: a class trip to New York City. "New York, oh, New York was very, very fast," Geraldlynn says. "They told us, 'Now don't go to New York walking like you walk in New Orleans, all slow like, because you will get hit.'"



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