As the school year begins, how has the Gulf Coast changed since Katrina?

"I cried when I saw my house," Chakia Boutte told WR News. The 12-year-old's New Orleans neighborhood looks different from the way it looked a year ago [2005]. Chakia points to a block of homes that were damaged when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. "All these houses
used to be fixed up," she says. Chakia's own home flooded in the storm last year [2005].

More than 1,300 people died in the storm, and many more lost their homes. Hurricane Katrina is the costliest natural disaster in American history. Relief and recovery costs from the storm are nearing $100 billion.

Some areas are coming back to life. Along the Mississippi coast, homes and businesses are being rebuilt. Volunteer camps are full of people eager to help.

Other places look as though Katrina passed through one month, rather than one year, ago. In New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, abandoned homes sit waiting to be demolished, or torn down. Overturned cars and uprooted trees line the streets. The air smells of mold and garbage.

This fall, Chakia will attend school in Texas. She has lived there since her family fled the hurricane. Other families are returning to New Orleans. About 55 of the city's 128 public schools are scheduled to reopen in time for the 2006-2007 school year. Though the public school system will be able to accommodate 34,000 students, only 20,000 are expected to attend.

"Parents have been very reluctant to bring young children back to the city," New Orleans City Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell told WR News. "It's too uncertain here."

**The Long Road Home**
In New Orleans, about half of the city's former population of 450,000 has returned. Electricity and phone service are still out in the hardest-hit areas. The city's roads are full of potholes. Mail delivery is slow. Grocery stores, banks, and hospitals remain boarded up.

The federal government has invested billions of dollars in a program known as the Road Home. The program will provide money for Louisiana residents to rebuild or sell their storm-damaged houses.

The most urgent task is protecting New Orleans against another hurricane. The **levees**—structures that prevent flooding—collapsed during Hurricane Katrina.

Although the damaged levee system has been repaired and improved, it is still not designed to handle a storm like Katrina. The Army Corps of Engineers is preparing plans for Congress that will propose ways to protect New Orleans against the strongest hurricanes.

**Changed Lives**

On the Gulf Coast, people speak of life in terms of "before Katrina" and "after Katrina." "My life before the hurricane was so beautiful," says Myeisha McDaniels, 13. "I had just made the dance team. My mom was just letting me go to the movies by myself. I was mad the hurricane came and messed everything up."
**Myeisha and other kids who have returned to New Orleans want to help rebuild the city. As part of a summer program called Gulf Coast WalkAbout, kids built bus-stop benches and planted flowers in a park that had flooded during Katrina. They also reflected on their hurricane experiences.**

In a journal entry, 12-year-old Duriel Harris wrote: "I am now used to a whole new lifestyle....Every day now is different from my pre-Katrina days."

### Kids Help Rebuild

Over the summer, kids in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas participated in the Gulf Coast WalkAbout program. They helped rebuild their communities. Here are some of the projects kids in New Orleans completed.

#### Repairing A Park
Kids painted trash cans, picked up litter, and planted flowers at a park that had flooded during Hurricane Katrina.

#### Creating Oral Histories
Kids recorded their hurricane experiences. Duriel Harris, 12, explains his family tree. His family’s home was flooded in the storm.

#### Building Benches
After noticing that people were sitting on stoops or overturned buckets as they waited for buses, kids built two bus-stop benches.