

## THE LOWER 9



A Film by Matthew Hashiguchi

(USA, 2011, 52 minutes)

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### SYNOPSIS

*The Lower 9: A Story of Home* features six determined Lower-Ninth-Ward residents who share their most intimate stories of home, as they resume their lives nearly six years after the storm in their Katrina-ravaged neighborhood. The individual's stories find voice in a narrative that intersperses contemporary interviews, abstract cinematography of destruction, and powerful scenes of present-day lives.

### ABOUT THE FILM

Bordering the Mississippi River to the south and the Industrial Canal to the west, the family centered community of the Lower Ninth Ward was one of the most devastated areas of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The 12-ft levee wall running north to south along the Industrial Canal ruptured in numerous locations, allowing floodwaters to rise above rooftops, destroy homes and cripple the foundations of this historic community.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward was home to more than 14,000 residents, 5,600 homes, five schools, parks, medical facilities and businesses. Since Katrina, less than 20% of its former residents have returned, one school is operational, the main hospital is non-functional, two of five parks are usable and over 3,500 of the original 5,600 homes are destroyed, abandoned or non-existent.

*The Lower 9: A Story of Home* is an extraordinary story of six diverse individuals who are trying to regain a sense of home after floodwaters rose above rooftops, claimed lives and crippled the foundations of their Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood in August of 2005. The film's shocking, yet beautiful, cinematography of the destruction that remains nearly six years after the hurricane captures viewers attention and allows room for audience interpretation.

The destruction of Hurricane Katrina displaced over 10,000 Lower-Ninth-Ward residents and created an empty void in the neighborhood. However, nearly 3,000 residents have returned determined to bring back their community and replant their roots.

Returned resident, Mack McClendon, is trying to make a difference in his community. McClendon is on a mission to create a safe community center, for young and old alike. In addition to McClendon, Stanley Stewart returned after waters reached the second-floor of his home and destroyed his custom car business. With the help of volunteers, Stewart is getting his business back on its feet and says there is no other place he would rather be. Sandos "Sam" McGee returned to the Lower Ninth Ward after spending a year in a hospital due to injuries resulting from the storm. McGee recalls the horrific night of battling his way out of an attic and almost drowning. Returning home has been a difficult transition for McGee, who suffers from depression related to the trauma of the disaster. All three of these individuals have their own reasons for coming back to the Lower Ninth Ward, yet they all convey themes of nostalgia, struggle and devotion when speaking of their home.

Unlike many contemporary documentary films, *The Lower 9: A Story of Home* approaches filmmaking from a hands-off approach. This technique does not employ quick handheld camerawork but instead allows the camera to be still and capture a scene for an extended period. Viewers are given the opportunity to actively enter into the film to interpret and understand the meaning of the abstract imagery.

In addition to contemplative imagery of the present destruction, *The Lower 9: A Story of Home* highlights vibrant cultural scenes of activity and life through observational footage of people in their daily lives. The six resilient residents, who are all living colorful lives amongst the destruction, are living proof that the people of New Orleans have an unmatched determination in life that keeps them moving forward. Although not directly connected, they all share the same strong desire to stay in this place that they call home.

Unfortunately, the story of New Orleans has become the story of Hurricane Katrina. *The Lower 9: A Story of Home* looks beneath the disaster to reveal the community, personal stories and importance of this tightly knit neighborhood. This not another Katrina film, but a film that looks beneath the disaster to keep the focus and attention on the people and culture of New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

By Matthew Hashiguchi

In 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. This order meant that any person of Japanese heritage in the United States, even U.S. citizens, were to be imprisoned in internment camps. For three years, both Grandparents on my Father's side were imprisoned for having Japanese ancestry. My Grandmother's entire family of two parents and seven children were taken from their family farm in California, where many of them were born, and placed in an Arizona internment camp. Forced to sell their home, farm and possessions, my Grandmother and her family received a check in exchange for all their property. When they went to deposit the check, it bounced along with their entire life savings.

My Grandmother's family was stripped of everything. Their possessions, lives and freedoms were stolen. They were humiliated and reduced to last-class citizens. This event, which occurred when my Grandmother was just a teenager, not only affected her but also impacted her children and her grandchildren. The resentment and disgust I feel towards this lesson in United States History is indescribable.

When at the homes of friends I catch myself looking at their family photographs. In one instance I saw a photograph of my friend's grandmother shooting archery as a young girl. It was seeing this photograph that made me realize how different my family and background is. During the early 1940s, when the grandparents of others in my generation were enjoying their teen years, mine were in internment camps, fenced in, imprisoned and unable to leave.

I personally don't know what it feels like to lose my home, possessions or way of life. I've never experienced that. But, I'm able to understand what that experience can do to a person. Through my Grandmother I'm able to see the pain of losing everything. What happened to her as an 18-year-old teenager is still being felt as an 85-year-old Great-Grandmother.

The citizens of New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward are experiencing a similar situation. For many of them, Hurricane Katrina took away everything. They were forced from their homes and swept away from their friends and families. It was their Executive Order 9066. I'm certain that the impact of Hurricane Katrina will still be felt in the following generations of victims and their families.

When thinking of the Lower Ninth Ward, our thoughts are immediately tainted. The neighborhood and culture has been exploited, transformed and molded into a product of Hurricane Katrina. It's become a tourist destination where

strangers view Hurricane Katrina's destruction without even knowing what was actually lost. It's been stripped of its character, personality and pride that was once full and deeply rooted in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward.

I am not looking for tears or sadness, rather community, culture and family. I seek to reveal the disruption and displacement that has struck New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, with the intention of bringing support to their struggles. The world needs to know what was lost in order to understand the importance of bringing it back.

## **PRODUCTION NOTES**

The story of Hurricane Katrina's devastating impact on New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward is nearly forgotten to the American and abroad public. However, the issues—which are clearly visible in *The Lower 9: A Story of Home*—still exist. In 2006, director Matthew Hashiguchi was seated on an international flight beside a woman from New Orleans. She told him of all the problems that still existed and he was shocked. He couldn't believe that this major city in the United States of America was still struggling one year after the disaster.

When he heard the story of New Orleans' ongoing struggles, it immediately made a lasting impression. But, while it was easy to find stories of Hurricane Katrina's devastation on the city and the Lower Ninth Ward, it was nearly impossible to find stories about the Lower Ninth Ward and its residents. Who were they? What was life like in the Lower Ninth Ward before Hurricane Katrina? That's what Hashiguchi sought to find out.

He told the story to co-director Elaine McMillion and they immediately began making phone calls to those in New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward, including Mack McClendon. Hashiguchi knew the stories were so magnetic and compelling and that the film must be made. In the summer of 2010, Hashiguchi and McMillion traveled to New Orleans to shoot the film.

They lived in an apartment above a garage in the Lower Ninth Ward. On both sides of them were abandoned houses. Stray cats and dogs, as well as roosters, roamed the empty streets looking for food and a home. Hashiguchi and McMillion couldn't believe the town, culture and community was vanishing before their eyes.

They met people at McClendon's community center, the Lower Ninth Ward Village, and began finding out the stories of the neighborhood. They quickly learned that the community was special to each person for their own reason. They helped the Lower Ninth Ward Village by shooting and editing a mission statement video, in addition to a fundraising video for their website. As they spent time at the community center, they met Allen Kimble who introduced them to many of the film's characters.

Hashiguchi and McMillion met with survivors of the hurricane and learned what “home” and “the lower ninth ward” means to them. As they listened to the resident’s heartbreaking personal anecdotes, they knew the story had to be told in their voice, from their point of view, with no narration.

Everywhere they went people repeated a similar, yet unique, story. The Lower Ninth Ward was a tight-knit community; filled with laughter, music, corner stores, playground, family gardens and movie theatres. To contrast the rich history with the struggling future, the filmmakers did not focus on images of the past. Therefore, a majority of Hashiguchi’s and McMillion’s time was spent going into the ruins left behind. They would wake up early in the morning and find the little pieces of life left behind in homes, parks, stores and churches; a calendar turned to August 2005, medical cards on the floor, diplomas and photos scattered and covered in mold, and clothing still hanging in closets.

Back home after principal photography, in the edit room, the greatest obstacle was determining how to structure the diverse stories so that viewers would understand the reason why this neighborhood is worth fighting for. In the end, experimental simplicity prevailed. It wasn’t necessary to explain the horrors of Hurricane Katrina through news articles and media coverage; instead the focus needed to be on the stories of the people who have returned to their home in the Lower Ninth Ward.

The film was finished in May of 2011. It was screened for faculty and students at Emerson College where people were so moved they shed tears and clapped for filmmaker, Hashiguchi.

## **A NOTE ON THE LOWER NINTH WARD’S HISTORY**

### **Prior to Hurricane Katrina**

14,000 – 18,000 residents

5,600 homes

Five schools, parks, medical facilities and businesses.

### **Since Katrina**

Over 10,000 residents displaced

2,842 residents have returned

Less than 20% of its former residents have returned.

One school is operational.

Main hospital is non-functional.

2 of 5 parks are usable

Over 3,561 of the original 5,300 homes are destroyed, abandoned or non-existent.

**Overview:** Bordering the Mississippi River to the south and the Industrial Canal to the west, the family centered community of the Lower Ninth Ward was one of the most devastated areas of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Entrance into the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood was restricted from August 2005 to May 2006. Nine months after Hurricane Katrina, residents were finally allowed back into the area to discover what was left of their homes and possessions. In May, as residents returned to their destroyed lots they quickly realized they had two options, rebuild or move away.

Both options seemed impossible. Residents could not afford to rebuild their homes, many of which were owned and inherited from past generations. At nearly 70 percent, the neighborhood had one of the highest rates of African-American homeownership in the United States and nearly 54 percent of its residents had lived there for over 25 years.

The Lower Ninth Ward was an irreplaceable community connected through its relationships and daily interactions with one another. Residents bought their food from the same corner stores. Porches were meeting places to talk, laugh or listen. If a child misbehaved down the street, news of their actions made it home before they did.

“Our neighbors were our relatives,” said Linda Jackson of the Lower Ninth Ward Homeowners Association. “Everybody knew everybody.”

Before the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, life in the Lower Ninth Ward was by no means perfect. Like in any community, there were struggles, obstacles and problems. But the intense desire of its current residents to remain in the Lower Ninth Ward reveals a unique and strong bond to the neighborhood that needs to be expressed.

## **FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES**

**Matthew Hashiguchi (Director and Producer)** Based out of Boston, Massachusetts, Matthew Hashiguchi is an award winning filmmaker, photographer and cinematographer originally from Cleveland, Ohio. In 2007, after graduating with a BA in Photojournalism from The Ohio State University, he went to work and intern as a multimedia journalist for newspapers in Ohio and Washington DC.

While working as a documentary video journalist for The Washington Post, Hashiguchi made several provocative

short documentary films that received praise and attention online, receiving hundreds of thousands of views in a matter of days. Hashiguchi decided to leave the world of journalism to pursue a career in documentary filmmaking.

In May 2011, Hashiguchi graduated from Emerson College with an MFA in Visual & Media Arts. Currently, he is completing his first feature-length documentary, titled “The Lower 9: A Story of Home” and also branching out into commercial and narrative work. Hashiguchi combines his experience as a journalist with his understanding of image, sound and pacing to tell a compelling story.

**Elaine McMillion (Co-Director/Co-Producer)** is an award-winning journalist who uses storytelling techniques gained through writing, in addition to experience in research, audio/video production and photography, to express a story visually through film. McMillion has over four years of experience writing, producing, shooting and editing for various mediums across platforms.

After graduating with a BS in News Editorial Journalism and working in the field of newspapers for three years, McMillion left the world of journalism to pursue a career in non-fiction film. As a filmmaker, McMillion’s short and feature works focus on unique individuals with striking stories who represent contemporary social and cultural issues.

She is currently in post-production of a historical documentary film titled, *Lincoln County Massacre*. Through contemporary footage, interviews and archival resources, the feature-length film explores the issue of police brutality in rural West Virginia.

## **CAST BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Mack McClendon**

#### **Founder of The Lower Ninth Ward Village**

Before the storm, McClendon collected antique cars. However, the 24-foot waves stole his home, his hobby, his cars and his business. McClendon, 54, knows what it feels like to lose everything and now he is trying to make it easier for others who are dealing with the same problems to come home.

McClendon started the Lower Ninth Ward Village after Hurricane Katrina. He bought an old metal, factory and is slowly turning it into a safe community center for the people to gather in the Lower Ninth Ward. He has provided bunk beds, showers, a library, a fitness center, a computer room, a basketball court and community gardens. McClendon started the “Where’s Your Neighbor” program which focuses on finding the displaced residents of the Lower Ninth Ward who were evacuated and never heard from again. Although, his goals are large, his funds



are limited. McClendon receives no money from the government, is understaffed and uses personal funds from his disability check to help his community.

### **Sandos “Sam” McGee**

#### **Lifetime Lower Ninth Ward Resident/Cartoonist**

After Hurricane Betsy, lifetime Lower Ninth Ward resident Sandos “Sam” McGee returned home to find his city and life in disarray. His high school lost all records of his attendance and tried to force him back into the grade that he had just graduated from. He left high school and enlisted in the Marine Corps where he was immediately sent to fight in the Vietnam War.

Upon his return from the Vietnam War, Sandos was briefly married and worked in New Orleans. It was again in 2005 that Sandos was face death once again. When Hurricane Katrina landed in New Orleans, he decided to stay in the Lower Ninth Ward with the goal of finding work after the storm. Sandos experience the storm first hand. Despite being stuck in an attack, washed away by the flood waters, being seriously injured by crumbling houses, he lived to tell and share his miraculous story.

Sandos now lives in the Lower Ninth Ward and spends most of his time drawing and sketching in a neighborhood corner store.

### **Leo Gant Sr. and Donna Gant Williams**

#### **Brother and Sister/Longtime Residents**

Leo and Donna grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward and continue to reside there. With their father a preacher, the brother and sister say “everything about church was a must.” They say they’re church in the Lower Ninth Ward, Battleground Baptist, was a strong community of brothers and sisters. But since the storm, the church has been washed away and the congregation has been dispersed all over the country. Leo and Donna are one of few remaining members of the church left living in the Lower Ninth Ward. Battleground Baptist Church temporarily holds services in a nearby church in New Orleans.

### **Angela Shelbia**

#### **Resident of Ninth Ward/Aspiring Actress**

Angela Shelbia, 26, states, “Hurricane Katrina was the best thing to happen to New Orleans.” While others would disagree, her opinion is influenced by the amount of housing aide and other resources that are now available to families in New Orleans. As a teenager, Shelbia lived in a neighborhood where drug dealers roamed the streets; and in a house where the utilities were shut off and rats roamed the ground. She says that the storm washed away all of the “raggly” houses and drug dealers, leaving it a better place for people to come home to. Shelbia is currently a

college student with dreams of winning an Oscar. She has many brothers and sisters and continues to live in the Lower Ninth Ward with her close-knit family.

## **Stanley Stewart**

### **Longtime Resident of Ninth Ward/Car Specialist**

Stewart gained an interest in cars as a child and began constructing model automobiles for fun. His hobby took a serious turn when he met his mentor and began working as a mechanic and detailer. He owns his own custom body shop in the Lower Ninth Ward and is well-known for his expertise. Stewart's shop had to be rebuilt from the ground up after Hurricane Katrina stole all of his tools and equipment. Stewart continues to be a positive and hard-working figure in the community where he has lived all his life.

## **PRODUCTION CREDITS**

Director	Matthew Hashiguchi
Producer	Matthew Hashiguchi
Co-Producer	Elaine McMillion
Composer	Lee Strauss
Director of Cinematography	Matthew Hashiguchi
Editor	Matthew Hashiguchi
Title design and Art Direction	Matthew Hashiguchi
Field Producer	Allen Kimble
Production Sound	Matthew Hashiguchi Elaine McMillion
Additional Camera	Elaine McMillion
Post Production Supervisors	Jan Roberts-Breslin Brooke Knight Julie Gustafan John Gianveta

Researcher	Matthew Hashiguchi Elaine McMillion
Transcription	Matthew Hashiguchi Elaine McMillion
Rerecording Mixer	Lee Strauss
Sound Editor	Lee Strauss
Mixed at	Boathouse Productions
Bookkeeper	Matthew Hashiguchi