

**STATEMENT OF
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**Before the
United States Senate Committee on Finance
on The Future of the Gulf Coast**

October 6, 2005

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me. I am honored to present testimony which, I hope, will help you remedy one of the most difficult domestic crises we have encountered in my lifetime. I am here today not as an expert on development, construction or tax policy, but as a man, born and raised in New Orleans, who is deeply concerned about the future of his city and the other hurricane-affected areas of the Gulf Coast.

During my three trips to New Orleans after the storm, I experienced humanity as I never thought I would. From horrifying, nameless death to clinging, new life. From relentless suffering to inspirational heroism. From senseless abandonment to unbreakable human spirit. These are scenes I have seen in far away places - not in American neighborhoods, and certainly not in the place I grew up.

Over the past weeks, my reasons for involvement have become clear to me. I want to help restore a sense of community and security among the citizens of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. My question is not whether the region should be rebuilt; but rather what is the most economically effective, socially acceptable way of rebuilding? How can we make our region safe, while responsibly and respectfully addressing the incalculable worth of human life?

Working with Habitat for Humanity as the honorary Chair of Operation Home Delivery

provides me an avenue to channel this incredible sadness that has devoured my soul. This program is getting people back into homes, back on their feet and on with their lives. Last week, through an amazing outpouring of volunteer support in New York City; Los Angeles and Jackson, Mississippi, Habitat for Humanity built 60 houses in a box for folks in need throughout the Gulf Region.

This past Monday, the first, post-Katrina house was erected in Louisiana. And many more are on their way.

Why are these Habitat houses so important? For many reasons. A house is security, safety and the beginning of stability for the families who have lost so much. But more than that, these houses are the foundations of their new lives and of new, vibrant communities. And it is important to note that these are not trailers or transitional places, but permanent, beautiful homes that people can be proud of. I will never forget the incredible joy and the gleaming smiles I saw on the faces of the single mom and her kids when I handed them the keys to a house I built with Habitat many years ago in New Orleans. Hurricanes destroyed the structures, but it did not destroy the spirit of New Orleans or the other Gulf Coast towns. The people can and will return, and the unique culture and vibrancy will re-emerge. But we must provide the means to rebuild.

I firmly believe that the Habitat for Humanity model is the right one for these circumstances - just as it is for people in need of affordable housing around the country and around the world. Habitat offers low-cost mortgages at no-profit, and asks people to contribute to the building of their own homes through sweat equity. When the homes are completed, the families are secure in the knowledge that this is their home. It is a hand up, not a hand out. And it is the first step to a life of financial and emotional stability.

But Habitat for Humanity offers just one part of the larger rebuilding effort. This effort requires the long-term commitment of the government, corporations, and other non-profit organizations working together toward a renewed and revitalized Gulf Region.

There are more than 300,000 families in the Gulf Region who lost their homes and are waiting for that peace of mind. The hurricane exposed the sad reality of poverty in America. We saw, in all its horrific detail, the vulnerabilities of living in inadequate housing and the heartbreak of losing one's home. There are many ways the government can help right these wrongs. Here are a few ideas:

(1) Habitat's experience proves that peoples' lives are changed for the better when they take part in the building effort. Many of the 300,000 families in need of homes are eager to find work and be part of the rebuilding of their community. You can insure that the people of the region are given priority in the rebuilding jobs, and the training necessary to do the job, as part of restoring their dignity.

(2) Rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast will involve many decisions that will affect the lives of the people of this devastated area for years to come. No one knows better what was wrong with the old patterns, and what will make life in New Orleans better, for example, than the people who have lived there all their lives. It would only compound the suffering that has already gone on to see homes, parks, schools, and all the other elements of the city rebuilt without the meaningful voice of its citizens at the table. Part of the healing and recovery will be giving the displaced a way to participate in what happens next.

(3) In many cities around the country, when a neighborhood is improved, it is the poor and working people who are the first to be priced out. We already see the first evidence of that in New Orleans as prices are rising in the portions of the city that were less badly flooded. You need to make sure that the rebuilding effort includes enough lower cost homes and apartments for the tens of thousands of New Orleanians with limited income who want to go home. We at Habitat can do much but we cannot meet the need alone.

New Orleans is my essence, my soul, my muse. I will do everything within my power to ease the suffering of my city and ensure she one day recaptures her glory.

I come to you with hope. I have no doubt that the government of this great nation will work with its people to lead New Orleans and the Gulf Coast back to an enlightened, proud, safe part of the world.

Thank you very much for allowing me to share my thoughts. I implore you to make it right, to make us proud.