

Mardi Gras: A reason to celebrate

NEW ORLEANS | As Mardi Gras approaches, the Crescent City has plenty of progress to rejoice in as it continues to move forward

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BY NICOLE ALPER

NEW ORLEANS -- This Louisiana city's biggest celebration has undergone countless transformations over the years, but none as dramatic as the one that threatened to cancel the event just as it was celebrating its 150th anniversary.

In 2006 Hurricane Katrina struck. But Mardi Gras marched on, a symbol of that indefatigable New Orleans spirit.

This year, Mardi Gras day comes early, on Feb. 5.

To note the city's path toward recovery, you need only look as far as the French Quarter streets -- clean streets, thanks to Sidney Torres IV, a boutique hotelier who, at 31, founded the chronically hip garbage collection company SDT (for Sidney Denecio Torres).

With drunken revelers cheering him on last year, SDT not only met its goal of getting the post-party city squeaky clean in record time, Torres' methods -- spraying the streets with lemon-scented disinfectant, clothing his staff in chic garb, purchasing stylish trucks with gleaming chrome wheels -- became synonymous with the French Quarter's newfound pristine condition.

"Last year, local news stations poured in practically daring me to fail," Torres said.

This year, he was rewarded for his efforts by being asked to serve as Grand Marshal of the most anticipated Mardi Gras parade, Orpheus, down the streets of the city he's helping to rebuild.

Reshaping the city

Torres' float is being created at Mardi Gras World, a massive workshop/museum across the river from New Orleans in the riverfront community of Algiers, a requisite outing for anyone wanting an up-close view of these Brobdingnagian creations.

Owned by energetic 81-year-old Blaine Kern, a k a Mr. Mardi Gras, the facility is getting a new home on the New Orleans side of the river. It's part of a massive redevelopment project Kern is spearheading on both sides of the Mississippi.

"After Katrina we were so afraid of what would happen to our business," said Kern's son, Barry. "But we soon realized that the people who love Mardi Gras the most --the locals, the families -- are the last people to give it up. When we're out of business, you can turn the lights out on New Orleans."

Torres riding a float during Mardi Gras is an example of something even more significant: the emergence of a youthful entrepreneurial spirit, not unlike that which came out of Buenos Aires' Palermo District following that country's devastating economic collapse. These are the people quietly reshaping New Orleans.

'Even more determined'

As I recently strolled down a once again thriving Magazine Street, a three-mile long stretch of cafes, restaurants and shops, I stumbled upon Suzanne Perron's eponymous bridal shop.

Perron spent years in Manhattan as a designer for Vera Wang, dressing the likes of Holly Hunter (for the Oscars) and Jennifer Lopez (for her wedding to singer Marc Anthony).

She came back to her hometown just weeks after Katrina.