

Tulane researcher honored for insight on Vietnamese community's Katrina recovery

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The National Institutes of Health recently honored Tulane University professor Mark VanLandingham for his pioneering research on how culture and shared history helped the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans recover more quickly from Hurricane Katrina while other communities faltered. Learn more about VanLandingham's work in this video. (Video by Carolyn Scofield)

When disaster strikes a community, a key factor in whether it can bounce back is its reserve of resilience before it was tested by hardship. Researchers are discovering that this resilience is inextricably linked to a community's unique history and culture.

The National Institutes of Health recently honored Tulane University professor Mark VanLandingham for his pioneering research on how culture and shared history helped the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans recover more quickly from Hurricane Katrina while other communities faltered.

VanLandingham, director of the Center for Studies of Displaced Populations and Thomas C. Keller Professor at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, has been named the 12th Matilda White Riley Honors Distinguished Lecturer by the National Institutes of Health. VanLandingham discussed his research at the 12th NIH Matilda White Riley Behavioral and Social Sciences Honors meeting in Bethesda, Maryland.

Matilda White Riley was a celebrated scientist and member of the National Academy of Sciences and a leader in the field of sociology. The NIH's Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research honors her yearly by recognizing people who are advancing the type of research she helped pioneer.

VanLandingham, who has spent much of his career studying demographic change in Southeast Asia and the health and well-being of immigrants from that region, began

studying the large community of Vietnamese-Americans living in eastern New Orleans just prior to Hurricane Katrina. The area suffered massive damage from the 2005 storm but rebuilt quicker than other surrounding communities, and VanLandingham found the shared culture and history played a role in their recovery.

“One example of how culture matters is family and social structure. The Vietnamese family and social structure is very hierarchical - it couldn't be more different from the American way of doing things,” VanLandingham says. “A Vietnamese student once described it to me as ‘Father Knows Best on steroids.’ While perhaps tough to deal with as an American adolescent, this cultural feature helped the Vietnamese to get organized and move forward much, much faster than the rest of us, who were frozen by own indecision and the very slow and confused response of our (non-Vietnamese) leaders. A second cultural feature that helped them was their suspicion of authorities and institutions that exist outside of their community. While many of us (non-Vietnamese) were completely demoralized by the post-Katrina failures of our local, state, and federal government, insurance companies, etc., to fulfill their obligations, for many of the Vietnamese this was not surprising at all. Indeed, this is what they grew up with in Vietnam.”

“Regarding lessons learned, none of the rest of us can magically ‘become Vietnamese,’ but I hope that the research will help disaster experts to become better attuned to the specific cultural attributes of the communities they are responding to, and to leverage these attributes so that they can deliver assistance in the most effective way possible.”

“I am thrilled to see Dr. VanLandingham receive this prestigious honor,” says Tulane Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Robin Forman. “His meaningful and important research is a wonderful reflection of Tulane’s longstanding commitment to carrying out work that both makes our local communities safer and healthier and provides crucial insights that have global relevance.”