
Children of the Spills - Phase II: The Gulf Coast and the BP/Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

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Children of the Spills – Phase II: The Gulf Coast and the BP/Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

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Abstract

Children of the Spills is an oral history project created to encourage people in "oiled communities" to share their childhood memories, stories, and artwork. This project strives to broaden public understanding of the damaging human effects of oil spills and to assist communities as they work to protect and support children growing up in post-disaster settings. Ultimately, this project explores the ways that dramatic changes to the surrounding environment shape young people and the places where they live. Children of the Spills was carried out in two phases. The first focused on collecting oral histories from adults in Alaska who were between the ages of 1-19 at the time of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill and were raised in communities affected by the disaster. The second engaged children and youth in the U.S. Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama who were impacted by the 2010 BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill. This field report describes the Phase II work of the Children of the Spills project along the Gulf Coast.

Keywords: children, youth, *BP/Deepwater Horizon*, disasters, oil spills, Gulf Coast, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, oral history

Introduction

Children of the Spills – Phase II is the second part of an independent project to connect persons who grew up in oil-affected communities in Alaska with children and youth who are now living through the aftermath of the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill on the U.S. Gulf Coast. Katie Gavenus, who is an environmental educator and collaborative artist, was raised in Homer, Alaska where she and her family were deeply affected by the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* grounding that spilled more than 10 million gallons of crude oil into the waters of Prince William Sound. This event had a profound impact on Katie's childhood, fundamentally altering the dynamics in her home, school classrooms, and surrounding community.

On April 20, 2010, *BP's Deepwater Horizon* oil rig exploded, killing 11 men and spilling approximately 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico over the next three months. Informed by her own childhood experiences and her training as an educator, Katie realized that millions of people along the Gulf Coast would now be living with lingering uncertainty and doubts. She also recognized that a new generation of children would be thrust into the challenge of growing up in a coastal place that was experiencing sudden changes in ecology, economy, and culture. Katie began the *Children of the Spills* project to address the dearth of personal accounts from children and families affected by the most damaging oil spills in U.S. history and to open up a space for individuals to begin the process of recovering from the technological disasters that befell their communities (<http://childrenofthespills.org/>).

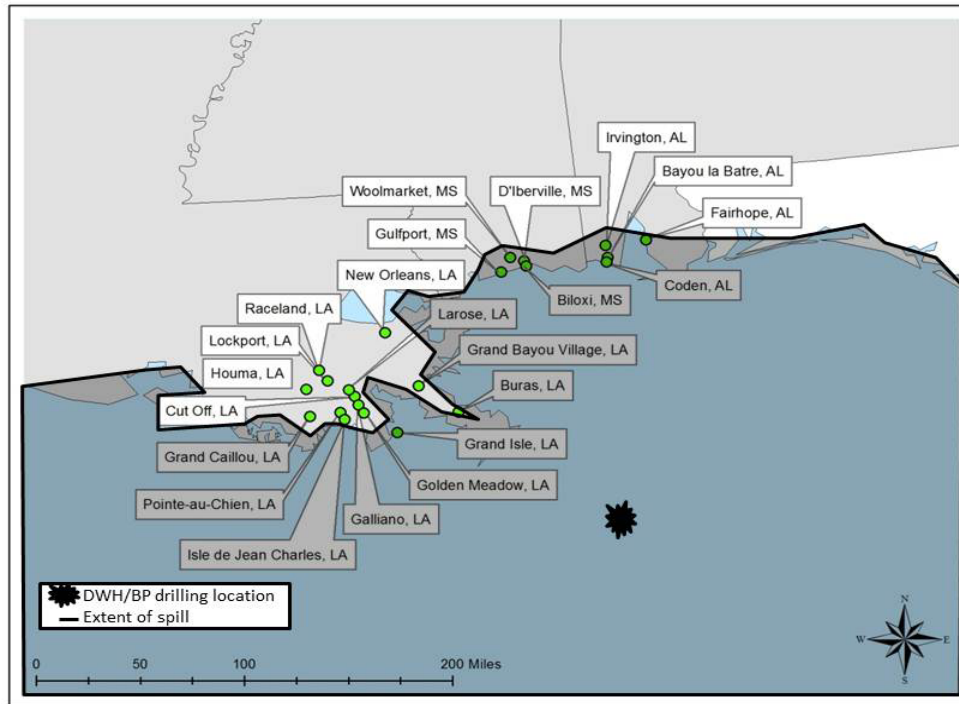
Phase I of the project, which was initiated in early 2011, was carried out in eight communities in Alaska where Katie interviewed adults who were children at the time of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill (for further details, see the Phase I field report by Gavenus, Tobin-Gurley and Peek (2013) in this issue of *Children, Youth and Environments*). Phase II of *Children of the Spills* was largely informed by the information gathered during Phase I. The Alaskans whom Katie interviewed noted time and again that it would have been helpful as a child to talk about the spill. Therefore, Katie shifted the focus of the project to provide an opportunity for young people along the Gulf Coast to learn about and discuss the effects of oil spills on communities while sharing their own personal experiences. This second field report describes that work.

The Gulf Coast

Phase II of *Children of the Spills* was funded by a grant from The Ocean Foundation. This financial support was used to bring the project to three Gulf Coast states affected by the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, sharing lessons learned in Alaska and developing programs to empower young people to talk about the oil spill and their hopes for the future through guided and peer-to-peer interviews, photography, drawing, and educational activities. The grant from The Ocean Foundation covered all of the actual costs of collecting, compiling, and sharing young people's stories in several communities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama (see Figure 1), as well as additional travel back to Alaska to visit Seldovia, the Native Village of Tatitlek, and the Native Village of Nanwalek. During Phase II, *Children of the Spills* worked with over 450 children and youth and more than 150

adults in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, as well as about 120 youth and 20 adults in Alaska.

Figure 1. Location of Gulf Coast communities visited during Phase II of the project



As Katie prepared to begin field work along the Gulf Coast, she developed a call for participation that was then disseminated through electronic list serves and other online forums as well as in person at community events (Figure 2). Katie made contact with school administrators, teachers, and leaders of child-centered organizations in southern Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. She explained to potential participants that by becoming part of the *Children of the Spills* project, they could help communities now and in the future better understand how to assist children and families that have experienced oil spills and other technological disasters. For the schools, Katie offered to conduct a one- to four-hour oil spill curriculum that she developed, share some of the stories from Alaska, and then ask the children what they would like to contribute (see the project website, <http://childrenofthespills.org> for the curriculum). Katie's intent was to begin a conversation with the students about their experiences related to the oil spill and then parents could decide if they wanted their children's stories to become part of the larger *Children of the Spills* archive.

Figure 2. Katie set up a *Children of the Spills* table at “Celebrate the Gulf” in Pass Christian, Mississippi



Photo: Erika Gavenus

After some reflection, Katie decided to use various participatory methods in her education curriculum, including peer-to-peer interviews, child-led photography, drawing exercises, and interactive Skype sessions with oil spill scientists. This decision was driven by the varying ages of the participants and what would best keep them engaged, the physical limitations of the space being used, and the size of each group. Most of the middle-school students who ultimately participated in the project helped to create video interviews. Because Katie wanted the children to have something to get involved in, she always asked them what they wanted to do: photography, art, audio, or peer-led interviews. Younger students discussed the question, “What will show you the Gulf of Mexico is healing?” Katie showed the students a set of drawings done in Cordova, Alaska by elementary school students to answer this question in 1989, and then the Gulf Coast children created their own drawings. In addition to working directly with children and youth, Katie shared the stories she gathered in Alaska and the Gulf Coast with adults. She directed these presentations and conversations towards families, teachers, and service providers that offered support to young people in the aftermath of the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.

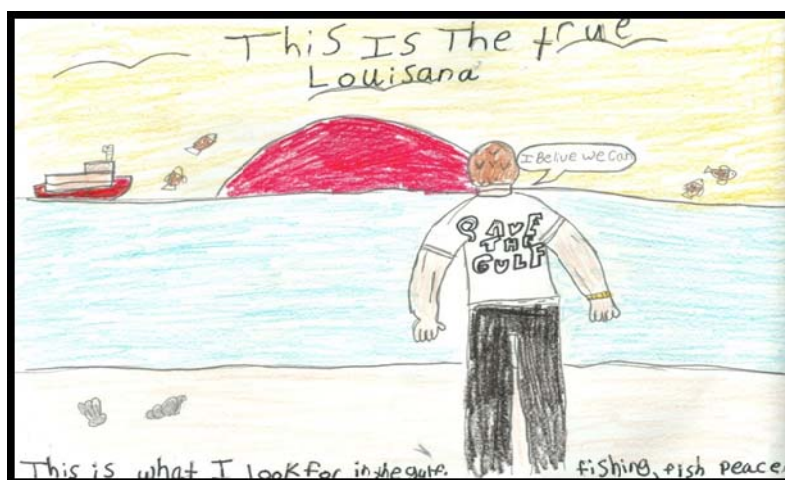
Given that the Phase II project scope was much broader than Phase I, and that there were many more communities and children affected by the spill along the Gulf Coast, Katie recruited her sister, Erika, as a research assistant, during Phase II. Erika helped to facilitate meetings, organize various facets of the project, and transcribe and analyze interviews.

Louisiana

Children of the Spills began work in Louisiana in late January 2012. Activities in the latter part of January and the first three weeks in February focused primarily on middle and elementary after-school programs. Approximately 90 middle-school students participated in the project through the Lafourche Parish after-school program. The curriculum was divided into two 1.5-hour sessions. The students first learned about the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill and watched segments of interviews with people who grew up in Alaska after the spill. Then the students discussed the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill and how it had affected their families and communities. Finally, student reporters interviewed a few students about their experiences while other students recorded the interviews with video, audio, and photo equipment. An additional 25 high school students from the environmental science class at South Lafourche High School took part in a more in-depth comparison of the *Exxon Valdez* and *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spills; group interviews with eight students from this class were added to the project oral history archive.

Nearly 50 elementary school students from lower Lafourche Parish participated in a two-hour program in which they learned about the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, viewed drawings completed by children in Cordova, Alaska immediately after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, and discussed how the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill affected their lives. These students completed drawings of their own on the topic of “What will show you the Gulf of Mexico is healing?” The drawings from each school were bound into a handmade book that was given to the school library (Figure 3). An additional 20 students from Cut Off Elementary School in Cut Off, Louisiana participated in a shorter program and created their own drawings.

Figure 3. A Lockport Elementary School student’s drawing in response to the question, “What should we look for to know the Gulf is healing?” He wrote, “This is what I look for in the gulf. Fishing, fish, peace.” His illustration, which he considers “the true Louisiana,” shows healthy fish jumping out of the water and an active fishing boat.



Outside of the school system, Katie and Erika conducted six group oral history interviews and 11 individual oral history interviews with children and youth, ranging in age from 5-18, in Louisiana. These young people were from Terrebonne, Lafourche, and Plaquemines Parishes, hailing from Galliano, Cut Off, Golden Meadow, Buras, and the Native American communities of Grand Bayou Village, Pointe-au-Chien, Isle de Jean Charles, and Grand Caillou. Katie and Erika made several trips to Grand Isle, Louisiana, culminating in a roundtable discussion with students, their families, and service providers about forming a youth group and telling the story of young people in Grand Isle. Many of these children and youth were from fishing families and a large number were connected to the oil industry. Most had experienced some sort of economic upheaval or uncertainty in their lives after the oil spill.

Katie and Erika also attended the “Healing the Earth” gathering in Venice, Louisiana (Figure 4). Leaders and elders from Grand Bayou Village hosted members of other local tribes and people from organizations that were working with these tribes. While their fingers were occupied with beading projects, the group discussed the oil spill, resource extraction, land issues, and traditional values. Katie shared interview experiences from Louisiana and Alaska and discussed the themes emerging from the project. She focused on how eager most young people were to play a role in helping their communities and environments heal in the aftermath of environmental catastrophe. Interviews with three young people were collected during this event.

Figure 4. Katie conducted a video interview at the “Healing the Earth” gathering in Venice, Louisiana



Photo: Erika Gavenus

Mississippi and Alabama

In March 2012, *Children of the Spills* transitioned to focus on Mississippi and Alabama. Katie used a curriculum very similar to the Lafourche Parish after-school program. Three elementary students from Woolmarket, Mississippi added their drawings to the project, and 105 middle-school students from D'Iberville and Gulfport, Mississippi participated in discussions, drawing sessions, and video interviews. The visual impact of the oil spill seemed to be less in this part of the Gulf Coast, and that was reflected in drawings and interviews. Most students spoke primarily about economic upheaval, especially within the tourism and fishing industries, as well as concerns about marine animals, seafood safety, and disrupted travel plans (for families that usually spent summers at some of the beaches in Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana that had been oiled).

In Alabama, seven students of the Marietta Johnson Organic School in Fairhope, Alabama participated in a four-hour spill discussion and video interview. A spill discussion and video-interview program was used with eight members of the Bayou HOPE group. The Bayou HOPE leadership program for students at Alba Middle School in Bayou La Batre, Alabama was developed by Boat People SOS to engage students with community issues and empower youth to make meaningful changes. Bayou La Batre is primarily a shrimping community that, like many other communities along the Gulf, is still recovering from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005; many students described economic struggles and fears about the future of the seafood in the area after the oil spill.

A special program was designed at Alba Middle School in conjunction with the 23-year memorial of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill (Figure 5). The school principal selected approximately 20 students to participate in this multi-part program. First, they learned about the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill through Katie's presentation and videos from Alaska interviews. Two days later, the students had an opportunity to ask questions of a scientist from the Oil Spill Recovery Institute in Cordova, Alaska, and an educator from the Prince William Sound Science Center, also in Cordova, via Skype. After the question-and-answer period, the students spoke to one another about their own experiences with the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. The event was filmed by middle school students involved in the school's photo/video program, as well as two local news crews.

Figure 5. Alba Middle School students in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, used Skype to ask questions of oil spill scientists from Cordova, Alaska. Their classmates filmed this special *Children of the Spills* event, which took place on the 23-year memorial of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.



Photo: Erika Gavenus

On the last day of the visit to the Gulf Coast, *Children of the Spills* hosted a booth at the Celebrate the Gulf Festival in Pass Christian, Mississippi (Figure 6). Dozens of young people visited the booth, with approximately 45 children adding drawings to the project on the theme of “What do you want to see as the Gulf heals?”

Figure 6. Children in Pass Christian, Mississippi, created drawings of their wishes for a healthy Gulf of Mexico



Photo: Erika Gavenus

Lessons Learned

As in the Alaska case, Katie realized early on that relinquishing control of the research to the participants would be the most effective strategy for data collection. This project was designed to allow a space for children affected by oil spills to tell their stories and share their experiences. For Katie, this meant that even if the video footage was shaky because the camera was in the hands of a child or the audio was quiet because the participant was shy, it was perfectly okay. The main emphasis was placed on the *process* of sharing rather than only on the final *product*.

When interviews began, many children responded by saying that they were not affected in any way. Or, when they did speak about how the spill affected them, they recalled media images and harm done to animals. Providing children living along the Gulf Coast with stories from Alaska helped the children open up about their feelings and gave them ideas regarding what they might share for the project. Students also seemed more engaged when they learned that Katie, now an adult, had lived through an oil spill herself. If this was not enough to break the ice, Katie made sure to provide plenty of time for questions about Alaska.

Conducting peer-to-peer interviews was a successful way to get all of the children involved, build enthusiasm, and reduce the problems of Katie being an “outsider” to southern culture and communities, even as she was an “insider” in terms of her own oil spill experience. Overall, it worked much better to allow the children to lead the conversation and discuss what they felt was the important part of the story.

Through the peer-to-peer discussions, the Gulf Coast children and youth learned much more about how their communities and even their own families were impacted. Katie acknowledged that this could be a startling realization for many children, so she made sure to end all interviews by focusing on the children’s thoughts for the future, their favorite things about living along the Gulf Coast, their recommendations for tasty seafood recipes, and other somewhat silly questions intended to make the children laugh and to focus on positive aspects of their environment.

There were also strikingly different outcomes across communities and age groups along the Gulf. Generally, students in the communities farther “up the bayou” (north) were less likely to initially say that the *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill had affected them. However, after discussions in class, many of these students spoke freely about a variety of impacts on their communities, families, and selves. Students from the communities closest to the coastal waters were much more vocal about the spill. Many students in these areas had ties to the seafood industry, oil industry, or both. Because these industries (and associated resource dependencies) are so important to these communities, students voiced a lot of ambivalence and frustration about the oil spill, clean up, fishing closures, and drilling moratorium.

For many children, it was difficult to talk about how things have changed in their communities. Therefore, Katie found that it was useful to focus on what the children could do to help their communities and to strengthen and sustain their

environment. This led to many conversations that were not about the spill, but about the place to which they were so deeply connected and how they wanted to make it healthier while also assisting others in their community.

Katie prioritized being able to give back to members of the oil-affected communities that participated in the *Children of the Spills* project. In the coming months, she plans to edit the video and audio recordings and interview transcripts and return them to the individuals or schools so they can keep them as a documentation of their experiences. Throughout her field work, Katie also spent time volunteering in the communities she visited. For example, Katie helped unload groceries at the Bayou Recovery food pantry in Bayou la Batre as a way to give back to the community where she worked and lived for nearly a month (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Katie tried to spend blocks of time in the communities most affected by the BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill to get a feel for the culture. This photo shows her in the small trailer where she lived, near the Bayou Recovery food pantry, in Bayou la Batre, Alabama.



Photo: Katie Gavenus

As an environmental educator, Katie also plans to build a comprehensive educational curriculum that can be used in classrooms across the country. This program will pair the science of oil spills with the social, cultural, and community impacts experienced by residents interviewed as part of this project. The primary goals of this program are: 1) to make it multidisciplinary so it can be taught in English, art and science classes; 2) to develop educational resources that dispel the myths and unknowns of oil spills; and 3) to keep children and youth informed by facts and connected to others through personal communication and past experiences.

Partnerships

Through this project, connections were developed between many individuals, organizations, and communities in Alaska and the Gulf Coast states. Nurturing these ties became a critical piece of the project as Katie realized one person could not reach all of the young people affected by oil spills. Through collaboration with organizations like Teach for America in New Orleans, essential aspects of this project will be able to continue and spread to those that might benefit from a space to share their experiences with technological and other disasters.

In the summer of 2012, student leaders from Future Leaders of America's Gulf (FLAG) and Sassafra Louisiana used Skype to share some of their media work with students participating in the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies' teen camp focusing on climate change and video/audio stories (Figure 8). FLAG is a high school student-led organization formed to educate the public—and other high school students—on issues regarding the future of decision making along the Gulf Coast. Sassafra Louisiana is another high school student-led organization, whose goal is to bring youth together in the restoration and preservation of Louisiana. This Skype session helped Alaskan students to understand the broader implications of climate change. More importantly, it inspired the students in Alaska to take action on issues important to them. As one 12-year-old boy from Homer, Alaska, reflected: "I could create a nonprofit like Alex [a youth leader] in Louisiana to protect my home."

Figure 8. Members of Sassafra, Louisiana, took a break from their environmental and cultural preservation work to participate in a group interview with Katie (left) and Erika (right). Months later, they spoke via Skype with students in Alaska.



Photo: Katie Gavenus

In the summer of 2013, the Southern Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center and Center for Hazards Assessment, Response, and Technology (CHART) at the University of New Orleans will work to send students from the Gulf States to

science camps in Alaska through the Prince William Sound Science Center. In addition, the Presbytery of South Louisiana provided funds for a follow-up trip to Louisiana to share project stories, drawings, and insights with a number of youth and adult groups as well as to incorporate *Children of the Spills* curriculum into a camp for local youth.

Conclusion

Although this project spanned many months, it will take years to fully understand the impact that the oil spills have had on children. The drawings, interviews, and other archival materials from *Children of the Spills* sparked discussion in dozens of communities throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Alaska about how children and youth may be affected by oil spills and associated changes to their communities and coastal environments. They also ignited conversations about how young people can be empowered to have a positive influence on their surroundings, something for which many young people expressed a need in their interviews and drawings. These early successes will hopefully serve as a catalyst for discussions and collaborative educational efforts that should be sustained over the long term.

The most important outcome is that *Children of the Spills* gave hundreds of young people a positive space in which to discuss the oil spill, healing, and actions they can take to protect their coastal homes. *Children of the Spills* is collaborating with many youth- and adult-led groups to continue these conversations and support meaningful actions young people can take to affect positive social and environmental change in their communities and environment.

References

Gavenus, Katie, Jennifer Tobin-Gurley, and Lori Peek (2013). "Children of the Spills – Phase I: Alaska and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill." *Children, Youth and Environments* 23(1): 155-166.

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Katie Aspen Gavenus was a toddler at the time of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and she grew up in a family and community directly impacted by the spill, clean-up, and litigation. She graduated from Bowdoin College in 2009 with an environmental

studies degree with a focus on marine ecology and a visual arts degree with a focus on photography and public, community-based art. In recent years, she has devoted her time to working as an environmental educator primarily with elementary students in Alaska, California, and Maine.

Jennifer Tobin-Gurley is a research assistant at the Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis and a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Colorado State University. She earned a B.A. in Sociology and Women's Studies in 2005 and a M.A. in Sociology in 2008. Her master's thesis research drew on qualitative interviews with local disaster recovery workers and single mothers who were displaced to Colorado after Hurricane Katrina. Her work has been published in the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* and she received first-place in both the 2011 Hazards and Disasters Student Paper Competition and the 2011 U.S. Gender and Disaster Resilience Alliance Paper Competition. Jennifer is currently involved in a participatory project focusing on youths' recovery from the tornado in Joplin, Missouri.

Lori Peek is associate professor of Sociology and co-director of the Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis at Colorado State University. She has published extensively on vulnerable populations in disaster and is author of *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11* (Temple University Press, 2011) and co-editor of *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora* (University of Texas Press, 2012). In 2008, she served as editor of a special issue on children and disasters for the journal *Children, Youth and Environments*. In 2009, the American Sociological Association Section on Children and Youth honored her with its Early Career Award for Outstanding Scholarship.

Websites and Other Resources

Children of the Spills: <http://childrenofthespills.org/>

Sassafras Louisiana: <http://www.sassafrasla.org/>

Boat People SOS: <http://www.bpsos.org/mainsite/>

Future Leaders of America's Gulf (FLAG):
<http://www.facebook.com/FutureLeadersofAmericasGulf>

The Ocean Foundation: <http://www.oceanfdn.org/>

Center for Hazards Assessment, Response, and Technology (CHART), University of New Orleans: <http://www.uno.edu/chart/>