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METRO

Power couple shine light on health care

N.O. kids need lots of help, they say

By Brendan McCarthy
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For about 20 minutes Saturday morning, all eyes were on a pair of buses idling outside a school in the on-the-mend Lower 9th Ward in New Orleans.

A bank of TV cameras, giddy children and anxious adults: Everybody wanted a peek at the Hollywood heavyweights here to publicize health care problems facing local schoolchildren.

Even a man in a tattered derby hat working underneath a nearby pickup truck's hood poked his head out to check on the commotion.

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Brad Pitt, right, and Angelina Jolie, top center, oblige local children with a photo. The couple is trying to draw attention to the health care needs of New Orleans children since Hurricane Katrina.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Children suffer stress, diabetes

HEALTH, from B-1

Eventually, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt stepped out from mobile medical units, took seats and scribbled notes as health care professionals and advocates spoke out on what they called a health and educational crisis.

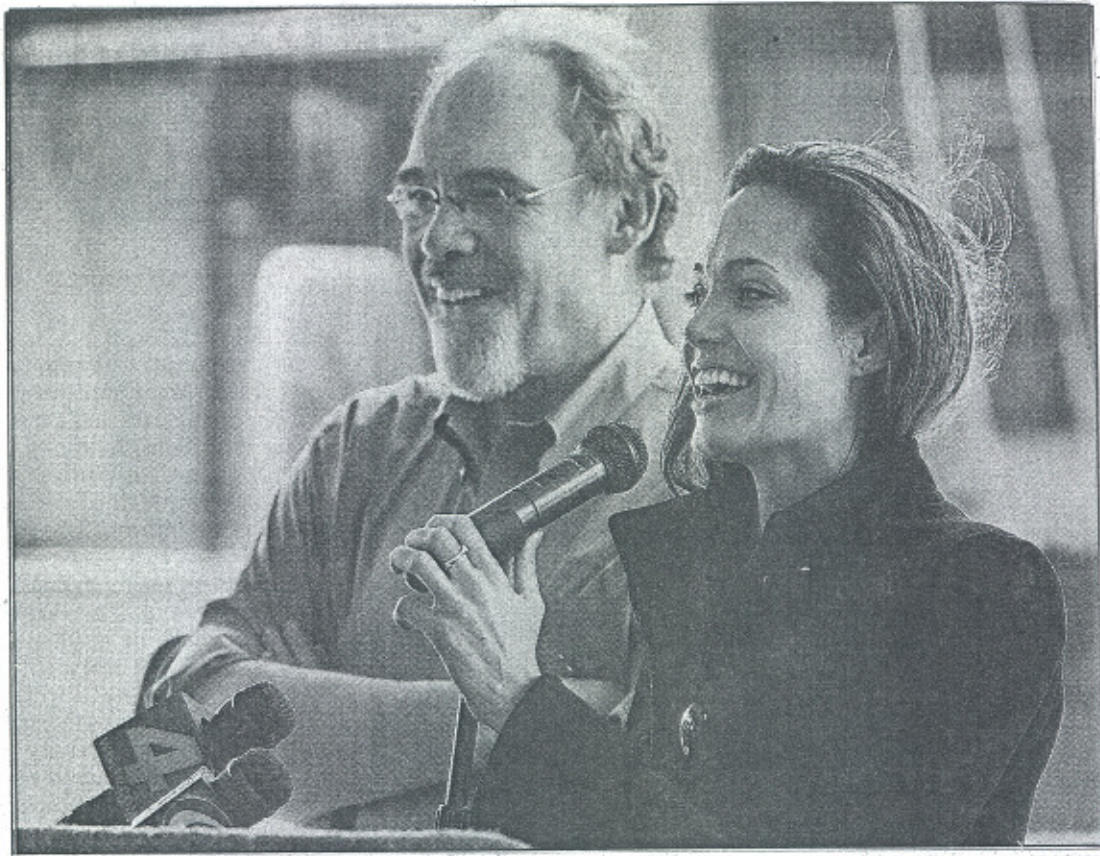
Though the mood was light among many of the attendees, the tone of the topic at hand was dire and distressing. Having used their star power to draw the excited crowd and news media attention, Jolie and Pitt remained mum and let the experts do the talking.

"We are seeing an exacerbation of problems," said Mississippi pediatrician Persharon Dixon, who ticked off a list of ailments that she said are afflicting children at an alarming rate in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, including stress, hypertension, diabetes and depression.

The news conference at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School follows the release of a study that found that more than 46,000 children along the Gulf Coast are still struggling with mental health problems and other serious aftereffects of the 2005 hurricanes.

The study, completed by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University and the Children's Health Fund, estimated that more than half of the still-displaced children in Louisiana exhibit one of three risk factors that can have a permanent impact on their lives. The factors are a drop in academic achievement, limited access to health care and clinically diagnosed depression or behavior disorders.

Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the New York City-based Children's Health Fund, said the government "by and large failed to do what needed to be done."



STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Angelina Jolie and Dr. Irwin Redlener of the Children's Health Fund talk Saturday about the needs of the area's children during a Lower 9th Ward news conference. "We continue to be very distressed by how long and difficult the recovery is," Redlener said.

"We continue to be very distressed by how long and difficult the recovery is," he added. Redlener and other advocates at the conference unveiled three demands, or so-called prescriptions, for meeting the medical and emotional needs of local children.

First, the advocates want FEMA and the federal housing agency to set up a case management system that would ensure every relocated family is put into adequate housing, with access to schools, medical facilities and community-based social services.

The second fix deals with expanding relocation options. The group wants politicians to initiate a streamlined process that would put families into temporary housing in well-established communities across Louisiana and Mississippi.

The last demand is for local officials and not-for-profit groups to provide more on-site health care and mental health services for children, along with mentoring and special education programs.

Throughout the news confer-

ence, Jolie jotted notes on a pad of paper and Pitt listened attentively.

Word of their appearance apparently spread quickly in the neighborhood. Several mothers, trailed by their children, walked to the school and stood on the sidelines as Redlener credited Jolie and Pitt with making an impact. The neighborhood residents stood quietly, sometimes pointing at the celebrities. A couple of giddy children snacked on Cheetos and smiled.

Redlener called Jolie's worldwide humanitarian efforts "unparalleled" by any celebrity. He named Jolie and Pitt the "humanitarian power couple."

Blocks away, giant pink blocks dot the ravaged neighborhood, a symbol of the houses pledged to be rebuilt as part of Pitt's Make It Right campaign.

When Redlener asked Jolie to share a few words, she demurred but eventually stepped to the podium. She talked briefly of seeing strife throughout the world, including in New Orleans, and how education is the key to healing.

Jolie highlighted a recent visit

to city schools in which children exalted in the opportunity to learn and do homework.

"The children here are feisty and fun and full of pride," she said. "It's that kind of spirit that will help everyone get through this."

With that, the news conference ended and the circus began. Children rushed toward Pitt and Jolie, surrounding them and posing for pictures. The couple obliged, shaking hands with parents and bending low to talk with pint-size pupils.

"These kids need help, and this is a step in the right direction," said Lakethia Stewart, a mother of four and a Lower 9th Ward resident.

Her daughter, Jasoniqua, grinned after procuring a snapshot with Jolie and Pitt.

"I just said 'hi' to them," she said pointing to the couple. "They said 'hi' back. Now I'm going to put this picture on the wall in my room."

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