

PERSONA: Henry “Junior” Rodriguez

06/03/2006 by [Sue Strachan](https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/) (https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/)

After Hurricane Katrina, the only way you could have missed St. Bernard Parish President Henry “Junior” Rodriguez on television is if you were living in an ashram in India. Though he was known locally for years through his work on the St. Bernard Parish Council, it’s only since the hurricane that the world was introduced to the force of life known as Junior. Renowned for verbally sparring with CNN correspondent Anderson Cooper and making sure St. Bernard Parish’s recovery is not forgotten, Rodriguez has a passion for the parish and its people that cannot be questioned.



Rodriguez didn't leave the parish during the hurricane, and like most St. Bernard residents, his house was devastated by flood waters. He now lives in a double-wide trailer that also serves as his office. Set in a sea of FEMA trailers, Rodriguez's temporary home is a constant hub of activity, with parish officials and others seeking an audience with him. If you are one of those few who hasn't encountered Junior Rodriguez, there's only one way to sum him up: what you see – and hear – is what you get.

Age: 70 **Born:** St. Bernard Parish **Family:** Wife, Evelyn Jessie; Rodriguez has five children and nine grandchildren. **Resides:** Chalmette Resided, pre-Katrina: Verret **Favorite food:**

“Everything” **Favorite movie:** “High Noon” **Favorite TV show:** “I watch CNN. I like the news.”

It took me a few weeks to schedule an interview with you – you’re quite a busy man. So I started calling you the “rock star.” Don’t I look like Elvis?

Can you swivel your hips like Elvis? Shit, everything I do swivels. When you’re 350 pounds, everything swivels.

Cowboy boots are a signature look for you. How many do you own? Eight. I had more before the storm.

You are an Isleño – a descendent of the Canary Islanders who settled in St. Bernard Parish around 1780. What generation St. Bernard resident are you? Sixth or seventh generation. Do you speak Isleño Spanish? No, sure don’t. I lost it. I used to speak it until I was probably about 12 or 13. My grandmother lived with us, and that was all she spoke.

How long do you think it will take St. Bernard to recover from Hurricane Katrina? I think the first year, about 35 percent to 40 percent of our people will be back. I think it’s going to take us five years to get back to where we were.

How would you describe the citizens of St. Bernard? It’s a close-knit community. Everyone knows everybody else.

Do you think the Isleño community will come back? They aren’t going anywhere. They’ll be back.

Is St. Bernard Parish prepared for the 2006 hurricane season? Yes, it’s a lot easier to prepare this year than last.

Why? There’s not as many people. There are maybe 10,000 people in the parish now.

They’ve now been through one, so we don’t have to beat them on the head this time and say, “Heh, get out.” I don’t think we’re ever going to have that problem again.

The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) – did anyone ever support it, even when it was proposed and built in the late ’50s and early ’60s? Sure, the St. Bernard Parish Police Jury at the time supported it, based on promises that were made to make St. Bernard the industrial frontier of the South. And that never happened.

Do you think the federal government will fill in MRGO? I don’t think it’s going to be filled in. Matter of fact, I know in all probability it won’t be filled in. Our No. 1 choice is to have it filled in. However, there have been two studies showing that even if it is filled in, it wouldn’t protect us from a storm surge. The fact is, once the water comes up and goes over the marsh, you couldn’t tell MRGO from any other canal.

You were against merging the state’s levee boards, but St. Bernard Parish’s own state senator, Walter Boasso, was one of the co-sponsors of the bill. Now there are two boards. Are you happy with the outcome? No, I’m not happy with it all. As far as I’m concerned, it’s just another layer of bureaucracy. As far as levee boards are concerned, it just seems to me

that our governor and Mr. Boasso – well, I think it's more a political thing than anything else. It's something that sounds good, sounds great, but there's no justification for it.

No. 1: Levee boards don't design levees, don't construct levees – all they do is maintain them. And maintenance consists only of cutting the grass and minor, minor repairs. The Corps of Engineers designs, constructs and maintains [the levees]. The Corps of Engineers is the reason we're in the situation we're in today. Federal levees failed. Levee boards have nothing to do with the construction or design of levees. To blame it [the failure of the levees] on levee boards – it's ridiculous.

I think the biggest problem they had is they got a serious problem in New Orleans with regard to levee boards. If they have a problem in New Orleans, take care of New Orleans. Take over New Orleans.

Our levee board not only maintains our levees, it also takes care of our drainage system – our pumps. I'm not ready to entrust my drainage system to one board – a super-board that thinks they know more than anybody else and may not even know where St. Bernard is, much less who lives here in St. Bernard and what our problem areas are.

Is the federal government responding favorably to St. Bernard's needs?

What agency are you talking about? It don't make any difference, we're not getting any help whatsoever. We should have been demolishing houses, I'd say about three months ago.

(February, based on when this interview was conducted.) We've been ready to demolish the houses. We haven't even gotten that coordinated between the FEMA people and our contractors. That issue is not resolved. FEMA has just been a problem – just a continuous mess of bureaucracy, red tape – inconsistency, is the best I can put it.

We don't have [all] our trailers yet. Orleans and St. Bernard are in the same shape. I just found out the other day that Jefferson Parish has 15,000 trailers. Jefferson Parish didn't get hurt like St. Bernard or Orleans. We've got about 5,500 to 6,000 trailers on the ground. (Note: FEMA received 10,000 applications for trailers in St. Bernard.) This community was totally devastated; Jefferson wasn't.

If we can't get temporary housing for our people, our people can't come back. They are basically running out of their FEMA money. FEMA keeps on telling them they'll extend it. It's one hell of a mess. People can't make decisions about what they are going to do based on nothing that gives them any confidence. Somebody has to make a decision so they can come home.

Do you think St. Bernard, post-Katrina, is getting enough attention from the national press?

I believe St. Bernard hasn't received the recognition we need, simply because we're overshadowed by the city of New Orleans. The city of New Orleans is what everybody knows. Nobody knows about St. Bernard.

What do you miss most about St. Bernard?

The restaurants such as Rocky & Carlo's and Barrister's. I miss the little things, which I took for granted before. My wife and I had just redone our house. I had been working on the damn house for something like 10 years. I had finally got it [right]. Life was just so simple.

Who is your hero? Bill Clinton. But you didn't even ask me why I like Bill Clinton – this is the guy took the country and got it in financially good shape and still had time to enjoy a cigar.

What are you registered as? Independent.

What made you run for parish president in 2003?

I thought I could do a better job.

What is your dream for St. Bernard? This is the opportunity to correct some of the mistakes we made in the past, and the council is working on that at the present time. We have that recovery group [the Louisiana Recovery Authority]. There will probably be similar things that this gentleman, Andrés Duany, suggested. Some of what he brought up will probably be implemented, particularly in Old Arabi. Those folks seem to want a historic district. This is not something new in St. Bernard – we tried to create a historic district in Old Arabi before the storm. It's going to entirely depend upon how strong of a district they want with the rules and regulations, which was the problem last time. Sometimes people want things, and then don't want to be told what color to paint their house, what kind of fence they have to have. Now, more than any other time, there's the opportunity.

What is your greatest fear for St. Bernard? The greatest fear

I have right now for St. Bernard is a bad hurricane season. Got to be optimistic: Our levees look like they are going to be finished. Even if we have a minor one, and the levees hold, then people have confidence.

Who has the better head of white hair, you or Anderson Cooper? Me! I mean, look at it.

Junior continues, joking: It's hard to maintain – my roots are beginning to show. I have to bleach it every week.

If you could take a vacation right now, where would you go? The only thing I want is a trip to Alaska.

What is one of your greatest achievements? Surviving.

True confession: I like opera.

–Sue Strachan

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