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## Browns linebacker Scott Fujita remains committed to preserving Louisiana wetlands

By Tom Withers (CP) – Aug 25, 2010

BEREA, Ohio — Scott Fujita arrived in New Orleans a few months after Hurricane Katrina blew through the city.

Five years have passed, but Fujita can recall seeing the storm's lethal and long-lasting impact as if it just happened.

"It looked like a bomb went off," the Cleveland Browns linebacker said before practice Wednesday. "Driving around the 9th Ward for the first time, it felt like I was in a third-world country. It was devastating — unbelievable and mind-boggling."

Fujita played four years in New Orleans, winning a Super Bowl title last season with the Saints, whose victory brought some needed healing. And although he signed as a free agent with Cleveland in March, the 31-year-old's heart is still back in the Bayou.

New Orleans, with its vibrant lifestyle, unique architecture and resilient people, left an indelible mark on Fujita. He loved the city and wanted to give something back, so he began a personal campaign to help save the Gulf region's threatened wetlands — long before the grasses and marshes would be drenched in BP's oil.

Fujita donated US\$25,000 out of his playoff earnings to two Louisiana groups that specialize in coastal restoration. In June, he returned to New Orleans and helped organize a fundraiser to aid the spill's cleanup.

So what sparked this California kid, adopted by a white mother and Japanese-American father, to devote time and effort to a place he hardly knew? Fujita said that seeing New Orleans knocked to its knees and struggle to stand had a dramatic effect on him.

"We all watched the CNN coverage and we saw the flooding and we saw all the terror of it, but we didn't know why it got that way," he said. "When I got there, I learned quickly that it wasn't just the storm, it was more the wetlands and how depleted they were and how that led to the disaster afterward."

Fujita said the film "Hurricane on the Bayou" also touched him to act.

"I've always been a little bit of an environmentalist," said Fujita, who graduated from California with a degree in political science and later earned his master's in education. "I don't think people understand how important the wetlands are as the city's first lines of defence. They talk about how every 45 minutes another football field worth of wetlands is depleted. And, for every mile of wetlands that's depleted, that equals about another foot of storm surge. That's what is going to lead to the downfall of the city if they don't get it corrected."

Fujita has always been socially conscious. His interest in helping others grew during his college years in Berkeley, where he was around many who were active and aware.

"People who thought globally," he said. "They think big picture."

But it was as a young linebacker with Kansas City that Fujita's appreciation for service grew. He was influenced by veteran teammates Tony Gonzalez, Trent Green and Tony Richardson, who donated time and money to local charities and causes.

"They were guys I looked up to, they were really involved in the community with causes they believed in and it was an inspiration to me," he said.

Fujita has also been a strong advocate for breast cancer awareness and research following his mother Helen's two scares with the disease, and he's looking into several Cleveland-area charities to support.

He wishes more professional athletes would use their celebrity status as a platform to help others.

"The window of opportunity in the NFL is pretty short and the time to do something where people are paying attention and people care what you have to say is pretty small," he said. "I feel an obligation to do things I believe in."

Fujita and his wife, Jaclyn, have twin daughters. The family has relocated to Ohio, but he intends to maintain a residence in New Orleans.

"Hopefully, forever," he said.

While in Ohio, the Fujitas have been renting their home. The current tenants? They work for a consulting company that was advising BP on how to clean up the massive oil spill.

"Obviously, they weren't doing a good job for a while," Fujita said with a chuckle.

He turned serious, though, when talking about the environmental impact on the Gulf region, which could be dealt another shot if the forecasts for an active hurricane season are correct. A severe storm could push the oil in the wetlands deeper toward the mainland and potentially cause further destruction and contamination.

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In this Aug. 21, 2010, file photo, Cleveland Browns linebacker Scott Fujita walks off the field after a preseason NFL football game against the St. Louis Rams in Cleveland. Fujita takes pride in his social work off the field, especially his involvement in helping wetlands recover near New Orleans, an area devastated by Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. (AP Photo/David Richard, File)

### Map



