

THE TATTOO

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Lessons learned from hurricane work

By JOSH GALES
The Tattoo

It all started one afternoon in late August, just after Hurricane Katrina hit.

My mom was sitting in the recliner with her laptop, and I was waiting impatiently next to her while she talked to my dad. He was in Los Angeles, helping to coordinate tsunami relief for the agency he worked for.

My dad told my mom that he would be going to the Gulf Coast to do relief work. At the time, the only things that the agency had to work with were supplies meant for Indonesia. But as the week wore on, things started to come together.

One man donated several industrial stoves. He didn't have time to get the pots and pans, so he handed over his credit card, and told them to buy what they needed.

My dad helped put together drives for relief supplies and after that week, there were enough to fill up an entire semi.

My dad and I headed to meet the truck in Baton Rouge, La., where the goods had been hauled.

On the drive up from Florida, we didn't know what to expect. We brought camping gear and our own food. We also brought about 40 gallons of water, just in case.

We drove in our minivan. The poor thing was never the same after the trip.

On the way there, I slept through the worst of the storm damage, and woke up near Baton Rouge. We were supposed to go to a church there where relief efforts were being coordinated.

Baton Rouge, which is north of New Orleans, didn't receive much damage.

The power was out for a couple of days there, and the occasional tree was down, but it was absolutely nothing compared to what I was about to see.

While we waited for the

truck to arrive, we met with the pastor, and found out more about the situation. The further south you went, the worse the damage got.

When the truck arrived, the process of unloading it began. The church had a forklift, but the pallets had to be moved from the front of the truck to the back for unloading.

My job was easy, however. I photographed it so the relief agency could use the pictures later for things like acquiring grants.

Once everything was unloaded, it had to be sorted. For the most part, the pallets were organized, so that wasn't so bad.

Having everything sorted



Josh Gales / The Tattoo

A Kmart parking lot near Bay St. Louis, Miss. contained a field hospital, relief kitchen and temporary home for volunteers and refugees.

made it a lot easier to distribute, and distribute we did. The entire load was gone the same day.

With nothing else to do in Baton Rouge, we headed on to Mississippi.

The closer we got, the more damage we saw. More trees were down, and billboards were history. There were abandoned cars on the side of the road.

As we neared our destination, there were no trees alive. Everything was brown. The trees didn't uproot like you would think. Instead, the trunks just snapped about 15

feet off the ground, no doubt where the water level reached during the storm surge.

Every now and then, we saw a lawn chair or something maybe 15 or 20 feet off the ground, stuck in a tree — washed there by the waves.

The interstate had been cleared already, so we didn't have any trouble getting to Bay St. Louis, Miss.

I saw cars strewn about like toys. I even noticed a dump truck that had been tossed into a ditch, trees bending, trees broken, a thin layer of mud on the road, cars ruined by the water on the side of the road.

I'll always remember that moment.

We were dumbfounded by

ice. National Guard members, media and residents alike were out there on their cell phones.

I got used to stepping over the downed power lines that were all over the place.

They were nothing to be worried about, though, because none of the power had been restored.

We stayed a few miles up the road in the parking lot of a Kmart. Although it was well away from the coast, the entire building had been covered by the storm surge.

Rescue crews pulled six dead bodies off its roof before we got there.

The parking lot was a hub of activity. A field hospital set up in the middle of it was treating a lot of patients. In one corner, a church had set up the "Waveland Café," where they served meals and gave clothes to hurricane survivors and relief workers.

We had plenty of food, but it was nice to get a cold drink and wash my hands there. On the other corner of the parking lot, there was a makeshift helipad where the medical helicopters would land.

My dad and I slept in a tent in the opposite end of the parking lot from the store. We had a few neighbors. One of them was Vicky Strong.

Strong was a waitress with young children who lived a few blocks from the coast. When Katrina bore down, she told us, her family evacuated to a house a few blocks further from the coast.

They thought they were fine, because the house they evacuated to only got six inches of water in it during Hurricane Camille. But Katrina flooded that same house with nine feet of water.

So Strong and her family "moved" into the parking lot. With things as they were, they had a nice place to stay, complete with a couch.

Her story made the news. Somebody saw it, and offered them a house in Alabama for a year. I have since been in contact with her family. She is doing well, and her kids are back in school.

Another neighbor we talked with didn't evacuate at all.

He told his wife to climb upstairs while he went out to retrieve his boat. In the middle of the storm, he left his wife inside alone while he got the boat.

While he managed to reach the boat, he couldn't control it. He was swept away from his house and into the woods. The boat struck a tree, where he was able to secure it.

He couldn't get to the house, however. He watched as the water rose and rose. It covered the entire first story. Had the house been only one story, his wife would have died. But she made it, and was living in the parking lot with him.

One family there had a dog living with them. Caesar was his name. He would just sit



Josh Gales / The Tattoo

A house on the Mississippi Gulf coast, damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

there and drool away the day.

But one morning, I noticed a big, black dog wandering around the other side of the road. Since Caesar was the only big, black dog I knew, I went to his owners' tent. It was early and they were still asleep. I rattled the tent. Nothing. I shook it a little harder. Someone stirred.

"Hello?" I said.

"Yeah," said a voice from the tent.

"Do you have a big black dog?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I think I just saw him wandering around on the other side of the road."

"Oh, thanks. I'll be right there."

I pointed to where I last saw him. Sure enough, it was Caesar. Pretty soon, he was back sitting in his spot, drooling just as much as ever.

During the day, we went out looking for churches that needed supplies.

One day, we drove to Biloxi, Miss., where the damage was very bad. All of the road signs had been either blown over or

washed away, so it was very hard to find where we were going. We ended up using landmarks like a stoplight that was hanging a few feet off the road to find our turns.

The church there had been flooded with about nine feet of water, and had a coating of mud over everything that wasn't nine feet in the air, so all of the activity was outside. We gave them a couple of the industrial stoves to use, and picked up a few propane tanks to fill for them in Gulfport, Miss.

The National Guard was all over the place — just like the tree services.

My experience was completely opposite of what we all saw on the news from New Orleans. Everybody was grateful for the help. Nobody was complaining. Nobody was yelling at the police. Nobody was shooting at helicopters.

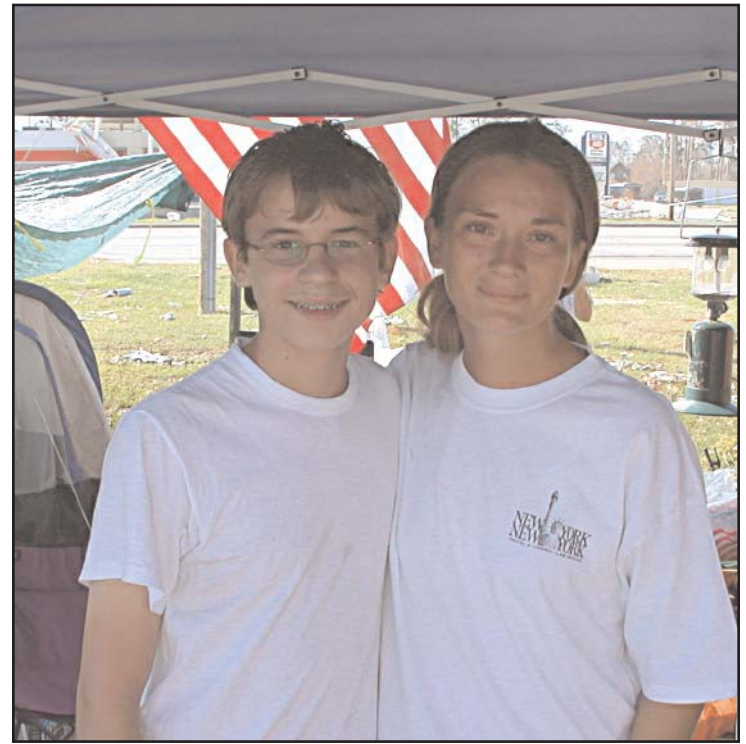
They were just people who lost everything and were starting their lives over.

The people I met were hurricane survivors, not hurricane victims.



Josh Gales / The Tattoo

A house on the Mississippi Gulf coast, damaged by Hurricane Katrina.



Tattoo photo

Josh Gales and hurricane survivor Vicky Strong.

Mix of flavors makes New Orleans great

By SAMANTHA PEREZ
The Tattoo

Tuesday, Jan. 17, 10:22 p.m., Ponchatoula, Louisiana

People's stupidity continues to amaze me. Without fail, there is always someone who comes along and says the most unintelligent thing at the worst time imaginable.

And now, when New Orleans is divided, torn by people's uncertainty about coming back and risking the flood once again, Mayor Ray Nagin stepped to the plate, swinging strikes the entire way.

In his speech on Martin Luther King Day, the mayor said, "I don't care what people are saying Uptown or wherever they are. This city will be chocolate at the end of the day. ... This city will be a majority African-American city. It's the way God wants it to be."

So much for American tolerance and equality.

His comments have outraged many New Orleans citizens, if outraged is even the word. He suddenly lost the support of people who had previously respected him.

Many white citizens of New Orleans are not returning to the city because

of his comments.

The killer part of this is that he just did not stop!

Instead of spitting out one infuriating comment and stopping, he continued, stressing that New Orleans would be a "chocolate city" once again.

Nagin said, "We as black people, it's time, it's time for us to come together. It's time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans."

New Orleans was known for diversity, and it's as if the mayor wants to wipe that wonderful culture away.

I did not live in the city itself, but I know and understand the history of the area: the Spanish influence, the French influence, the strong African American culture that gave us jazz.

New Orleans was a city of mixing cultures, mixing history, and that is what made the Crescent City so magical.

Nagin's speech undermined that entire concept of cultural exchange and shared history. His speech upset the balance that the city had for generations.

But life goes on, and — despite the mayor's speech — two things important happened to me today. First and foremost, I went to my first college class

ever. Second, I realized that the new car smell in my car is quickly fading away. It's almost gone.

I consider the second point important because it means that time really is moving forward. Sometimes, it's easy to forget that and get lost in the stress and busyness of life like this. But I sat down in my car today after school, and the happy smell wasn't there to greet me. It was strange. The newness is gone.

People naturally adjust and find a new 'normal,' and that's what I've done.

I'm used to coming home after a day at this strange school and seeing the FEMA camper waiting for me. I'm used to sleeping on a sofa next to a space heater. I have adjusted to cold showers. This is what humans do. We adjust.

There's a university in the same town as my new school, and they have a program where high school students can take classes and earn college credit.

Since St. Thomas Aquinas, my post-Katrina high school, doesn't offer the English class I had been taking before the hurricane, I decided to take one at the college.

I tested out of a few levels, and so

this afternoon, I walked into English 301. It's a literature class, *Beowulf to Paradise Lost*.

They all stared at me — college juniors, college sophomores, graduate students — some old enough to be my parents.

I was dressed in my high school uniform, so all the eyes on the room were locked onto my schoolgirl outfit.

Believe me, it was slightly unnerving. I gave a wave, and that snapped them out of their daze. They went back to talking amongst themselves.

I was nervous because it was new, but I know that I'll adjust to it soon. It's only natural that I do.

And in time, people in general will adjust to the fact that the New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina will be far different from the New Orleans of before.

By the influences of the floodwaters and of the mayor himself, the city will be drastically different.

The foundations of the mixed culture have been shaken by the forces of nature and the force of Nagin's speech.

Still, everything shifts to a new normal eventually.

As humans, we rationalize and adjust, and on Thursday, when I drive to the college and walk into the classroom, the newness will almost all be

gone — just like the newness of a car.

Time helps us adjust, if only we let it, and then the strangeness of a life so different from the one we knew before — the life that I knew — doesn't seem quite so bad.

About the Katrina journals

When Hurricane Katrina smashed ashore last August, Louisiana teen Samantha Perez started writing about the storm that washed away much of her old life. Her journal, chronicled in the pages of *The Tattoo*, is all available on our website at www.ReadTheTattoo.com. Read it for an eye-opening and intensely personal look into the eye of the worst storm in recent history. *The Tattoo's* hurricane coverage also includes more photos by Josh Gales as well as cartoons and stories from other teens in Connecticut, Florida and California.

WWW.READTHETATTOO.COM

The best teen journalism in the world. For questions, comments or to join, contact advisors Steve Collins and Jackie Majerus at (860) 523-9632.