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My Katrina Story

By Susan G. Talley

*U*ntil Hurricane Katrina, I had never evacuated for a hurricane and neither had my husband, Jay. As a child, I rode out Hurricane Betsy with my family in Covington, Louisiana, north of Lake Pontchartrain. Jay had done the same with his parents in Mid-City New Orleans.

Any New Orleanian born before 1965 has a story from Hurricane Betsy. These “Betsy” stories are a part of a family’s history. Jay’s grandparents were rescued by boat from their roof, and it took three days for his father to find them in a shelter. His grandparents lived with his family until they could repair their home. My father managed to find a generator to run his freezer and a few lights. When my brother decided we should try for television, he blew up the old black and white set. Once commerce resumed and my father calmed down, we bought a new color TV. Within a few weeks, kids were back in school and life went on. Katrina is an entirely different story.

On Friday, August 26, our firm’s comptroller asked me to attend to some financial matters because he was concerned about Katrina. I thought he was being overly cautious, but complied. It looked like Katrina would hit the Florida panhandle. Saturday, Jay and I made our typical hurricane preparations—just in case. As of Sunday morning, we planned to remain home.

By noon on Sunday, however, Mayor Nagin ordered a mandatory evacuation. Jay’s parents had already evacuated to north Louisiana and were calling. My parents thought we should ride it out in Covington. Our teenage son, George, clearly thought his parents had lost all sense of responsibility.

To appease them, we decided to evacuate. We secured patio furniture and some household contents. Thinking

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we would be gone just a few days, we packed only casual clothes and filled the car with ice, food, bottled water, flashlights, and batteries. At the last minute, Jay grabbed our checkbook and insurance policies, and George packed his textbooks. As we drove away Sunday afternoon, it never occurred to us that we would not see our home for over two weeks and not live in it for almost a month.

Traffic on the interstate was gridlocked, so we decided to take the old road around Lake Pontchartrain. There was no traffic, which made for a very eerie drive. We feared police

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would turn us back at any minute. On one stretch of road, water was already up to the roadbed from the storm surge.

Once we settled in Covington, we sent George to spend the night with my sister, Carolyn, her husband, Edward, and her adult daughter, Elizabeth. Carolyn's home is less than a mile from my parents, who are both in their 80s. Both homes are in a tree-filled neighborhood. Back at my parents' home, we waited and tried to sleep.

Early Monday morning, August 29, the winds began. Power remained on for several hours, and the two households kept in touch by phone. As the winds picked up to tropical storm force, we lost electricity. Not long thereafter, full hurricane winds and rains were upon us. We heard incredibly loud cracking

sounds, which we thought were lightning and thunder. Quickly, we realized that trees were breaking in two as if they were toothpicks.

We watched, mesmerized, as trees fell around us. Trees sliced through the roofs of neighboring homes. One tree fell across my parents' garage opening. The cars were fine but were trapped. Other outbuildings were demolished. Fortunately, the main house was spared. As soon as the trees began falling, the phones went dead. Our cell phones and Blackberries were not working.

Next, there was no water pressure.



Uprooted trees had broken water lines. Although we had plenty of bottled water to drink, we were concerned about bathroom facilities. Jay and I grabbed every bucket and tub we could find and set them out in the storm to collect rainwater.

By mid-afternoon, Katrina passed. The winds and rains remained at tropical storm levels, but the worst was over. With no communication between the two households, Jay insisted that we walk to Carolyn's. Although I disagreed, I would not let him go alone. Buffeted by winds and rain, we picked our way around downed trees and power lines. After we had covered about a block, a gust of wind toppled a large pine in front of us. I made the case that George would be better off with live parents, and we turned back.

About an hour elapsed, and Jay

insisted we try again. Not knowing the difference between a power, phone, or cable line or whether the lines were live, we shouted out whenever one of us spotted a line. The streets of my childhood were unrecognizable jumbles of trees and utility lines. We would go down one street and have to turn back because there were too many tangled lines. At one point, Jay climbed over a fence to let us through a backyard. Somewhere along the way, I fell over a tree trunk. After almost two hours, we made it to Carolyn's home. George was sitting by a French door reading. He looked up and asked, "What are you doing here?" And, went back to his reading. There are some things Katrina did not change.

We rested for a few minutes and exchanged accounts of the day. Jay and I knew that darkness would soon fall, and we could not leave my parents alone. We steeled ourselves for the trek back and agreed with Carolyn that we would regroup in the morning.

Once Katrina blew through, the heat became oppressive. Sleep was impossible. Tuesday morning dawned, and we began several days of a very primitive life. Using chainsaws, neighborhood men cleared yards and streets to make foot travel possible. We all pitched in to haul debris. At night, light came from flashlights, oil lamps, and candles.

My main role was as cook. Fortunately, my parents had gas service. Carolyn and I performed freezer and refrigerator triage to decide what would be cooked first. George and Elizabeth then made deliveries to neighbors with electric kitchens. Each day ended with exhaustion and efforts at fitful rest.

Any modest improvement became a milestone. On Wednesday, we discovered that one outside faucet worked. We rigged up a hose, and neighbors came with their pitchers. We boiled water for washing and bathing. Through word of mouth, we learned that FEMA was arriving with supplies. When George and Elizabeth returned later that after-

noon with ice, bottled water, and MREs, a bag of ice never looked so good.

This entire time, we had only one source of news—an AM radio station broadcasting from New Orleans. Much of the information was third-hand, as listeners and local officials called in or appeared at the studio. Hysteria reigned. We heard that the levees had broken (true). A wall of water was pouring down St. Charles Avenue (not true). As the nation heard, there were reports of widespread rape and murder, especially in the Superdome and Convention Center, and rampant looting and occupancy of residences by gangs (unspeakable criminal acts did occur, but it was later proven that news reports were significantly overblown). For almost two weeks we were not sure whether our home had flooded, sheltered gangsters, or both.

In the meantime, George worried about school. On Wednesday, the state school superintendent announced by radio that New Orleans schools might not open for the rest of the year and that parents should enroll their children in the nearest possible school. With luck, neighbors of my parents had a child attending the Louisiana School, a magnet boarding high school for juniors and seniors in Natchitoches, Louisiana. It seemed like a good fit. We got the phone number and other details from them.

By early Thursday, the streets were clear enough to reach highways. On Thursday morning, Edward and Jay bought portable generators for each house. In addition, the water pressure was improving and a second FEMA run yielded more ice. The next foray was for gasoline. Without power, local gas stations could not operate. Edward, Jay, and I set out in the direction of Baton Rouge with every gasoline can Edward could find. Just south of Baton Rouge, a cell signal came up and my phone rang. Jay and I are both partners in the same New Orleans law firm. It was one of our

partners barking, “Why aren’t you answering your phone?” The firm had set up a temporary office in Baton Rouge, and our partner had rented a country home outside of Baton Rouge from a client that we could share (we later took in two associates who could not find housing). We swung by a friend’s home to see what we could learn. This was the first time since early Monday morning that we had seen television news, including the disturbing footage of the city. We headed back to Covington to set up the generators.

Friday, we drove again toward Baton Rouge. As soon as we had a cell signal, we called the Louisiana School and George was admitted on the spot. I never thought I would be enrolling my son in boarding school by cell phone. We checked in at our



new Baton Rouge office. Then, we were off to north Louisiana, where we purchased school and dorm supplies, bought George school clothes, and rented an extra car. It was like preparing to send a child to college—but in a day.

On Sunday, I drove George to school, and Jay returned to Baton Rouge to attend to firm matters. George and I hurriedly went through an orientation process, filled out forms, and moved him into his dorm room. As I started up the rental car to drive to Baton Rouge, it dawned on me that I had no idea how long George would remain at the Louisiana School. If he finished his junior year

there and decided to stay for his senior year, college would follow. He might never again live permanently at home. All I could do was take a deep breath and start driving.

On Labor Day, a partner was able to check on his home in Jefferson Parish. Once he was able to do that, he talked his way through security checkpoints and reached our firm’s downtown building. There, he scared off looters, who had done minor damage and were evidently looking for food and cash. From that point on, with the help of a state police pass, the firm began regular runs into New Orleans to secure the building and move files, servers, and other equipment to Baton Rouge.

Meanwhile, client work continued, despite the challenges. Cell phone service and the mails were disrupted.

What have my family and I learned from our Katrina story? The most significant lessons are the fragility of life and the importance of friends and family.

Most local courts were closed or operating on a limited basis. The IT challenges were daunting. There were missing employees to account for (all were eventually located). Fortunately, help poured in from all quarters, including from RPPT Section members.

Lawyers and personnel chipped in to handle insurance claims, send out client messages, formulate appropriate advertising, move equipment and furniture, track down housing leads for personnel, research insurance issues for client briefings, and perform other odd jobs. All of this was being done with limited computers and temporary furnishings. At times, our office resembled a penny stock boiler room.

Nevertheless, it worked. Many lawyers and staff who had lost their homes and cherished possessions showed up day in and day out to do their part.

On Tuesday, September 13, Jay found time to join a New Orleans run to check on our home. We were incredibly lucky. We did sustain some wind and electrical damage, but our home had not been flooded, looted, or vandalized. There was no electricity, but we had gas, water, and phone services. By Thursday, September 22, we were able to make the trip into New Orleans together. It felt good to be in our home again, even if we could not live there.

On Friday, September 30, over a month after Katrina and with power restored, we slept for the first time in our home. On Saturday night, a neighbor hosted dinner for everyone who was back in the neighborhood. After we sat down to eat, Jay made two toasts. His first toast was to the health and safety of our neighbors. His second toast was probably more meaningful to this group of New Orleanians. He joked that we would never have to hear another Betsy story again. Hereafter, only Katrina stories would be told.

The next week, Jay's parents moved in with us because their lovely home had been badly flooded. In mid-October, we were able to return to work in our New Orleans office. For several months, our days were filled with traveling between New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Natchitoches, doing client work, addressing firm administrative matters, traveling for client and bar work, helping Jay's parents, tending to home repairs, and squeezing in random meals and sleep.

As I finish this article, almost 11 months have passed since Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. George's school reopened in January. He is now attending summer classes at a local university, working in an internship, and anticipating college visits. George and his classmates, many of whose homes were devastated, are to be

commended for what they have accomplished. They are indeed special teenagers, who will now have their own Katrina stories. Jay's parents bought a condominium, are happy in their new quarters, and sold their home to a young couple who are restoring it as their new home.

New Orleans successfully held Mardi Gras, the French Quarter Festival, and Jazz Fest, all important milestones. The mayoral election was concluded, with Ray Nagin the winner. No matter the outcome, voters participated in the election, it was fairly held, and we can move on with the rebuilding process.

Even now, New Orleans remains two cities. The French Quarter, CBD, Garden District, and Uptown neighborhoods are repopulating. Businesses and schools are open. Yet, the rest of the city resembles a war zone, and recovery will be a slow, costly, and onerous process. It is important for the rest of the country to understand the scale of the disaster and the need to rebuild New Orleans. From an economic perspective, the port of New Orleans and Louisiana's oil and gas industry are critical to the economic well-being of the entire country. From a more subjective perspective, think of what our country would be like without the contribution of New Orleans's music, food, culture, and history.

What have my family and I learned from our Katrina story? The most significant lessons are the fragility of life and the importance of friends and family. We will never again take them for granted. Next is the resilience of the human spirit. Although we have witnessed the worst of humanity (the looting, opportunism, and indifference), to a greater degree we have seen the best of humanity—from the incredible actions of our firm personnel, to the individual acts of kindness from friends and strangers, to the troops who patrolled our neighborhoods and happily joined in our traditions, to the volunteers who continue to help clean city streets and gut flooded homes, to the small business owners who are persevering in extremely uncertain times.

The people of South Louisiana have

a unique spirit. Over the last 300 plus years, we have survived floods, epidemics, governance by multiple countries, and the Civil War. We can survive Katrina and rebuild an even better New Orleans. With my Katrina story to pass on, I plan to be a part of that rebuilding.

Laissez les bon temps rouler encore!
Let the good times roll, again! ■