

## Eye on Katrina- one person's experience

By Elizabeth Campbell



For as long as I can remember, I have heard about the devastation that would be left in the wake of "the big one"- the category four or five hurricane that travels up the Mississippi or hits New Orleans head on. I remember Nash

Roberts, a locally legendary weatherman, with his flip chart drawing of the Gulf Coast and colored markers, talk about the devastation that would be left behind. Each year, there were stories of how Camille and Betsy ravaged our area. But I never thought I would see The Storm. As a New Orleans local, the idea that each year could be the one that the city takes on a Venetian topography, just like it could be the year the Saints went to the Super Bowl. Everyone knew it COULD happen, but no one thought it likely.



At a meeting Wednesday, August 24<sup>th</sup>, I first heard of Katrina. We were meeting about collaboration and making our Pilot Program a success. Since we are in the disaster field, we discussed that our

program was to prepare for the catastrophic events, but address the needs of communities responding to disasters of all shapes and sizes. I thought little more of Katrina. Friday night I got an email telling me that there would be a conference call about Katrina and that, since she was threatening my pilot community, I should listen in. I still thought nothing. The call was filled with reports of what different voluntary organizations and FEMA were doing in preparation for Katrina's landfall. This is when I realized that Katrina may make a bigger impact on my life than the ten previous named storms this year. Still, I had no idea what the Gulf Coast would be facing not more than 60 hours later.



Sunday, I was told to go to Red Cross headquarters on Monday. Hearing the tension in the voices of seasoned disaster veterans, I started strongly urging my family back in New Orleans to leave. All but one did. They scattered to various points outside of New Orleans, staying close enough to get home easily when the storm blew through, but far enough away to avoid the weather and to be able to get out further should she turn toward their safe spot. We "activated" the family emergency plan- each person from New Orleans would report to my brother in Chicago or to me, then we would spread the word on their status to the others. My husband's grandmother stayed behind with her brother, his wife, and their son and daughter-in-law, despite my tear-filled request that they reconsider and leave. By this point it was beginning to look like this could be a really nasty storm. But so many had in the past and, for some reason or another, they had not been so bad.



Then I heard something I never remember hearing before: New Orleans was under a mandatory evacuation. It started to sink in that I may not see those who stayed behind again. I realized that this could be the storm we had been warned about since my days in grade school. While other hurricanes have made me nervous, this one terrified me, although for no specific

reason. Tears welled in my eyes and a knot grew in my stomach. It felt different. We said goodbye to the group that was staying - fully understanding that it could be the last time we speak to them. And we prayed- that the storm weakened, that it miraculously went away, that people gained some sense, listened to authorities and got out, that predictions were wrong- anything that would save lives and minimize property damage.



Monday brought a twinge on good news- Katrina had weakened a bit and was expected to make landfall further east than predicted. That put Greater New Orleans on the "weaker" side. But that relief was

momentary- my first conference call with people down in Louisiana told me things were still grave. Areas were flooding and the Mississippi and area canals were swelling. The next call- a levee had broken in New Orleans; no confirmation of where, three were confirmed dead, it was raining in the Superdome. An hour later, we received word that it was the levee in the 9<sup>th</sup> ward. The thought that came to my mind was, "oh my God, people in that area don't usually leave." I could not reach my husband's grandmother, and we did not know the status of her area.

Tuesday started with word that the 17<sup>th</sup> Street canal had been breached. I frantically sought more information. The group who stayed behind was just blocks from there. It turned out to be alright for our family- they were on the Metairie side, not the New Orleans side. They were still dry. Still no news from them, though. The whole day was occupied with updates and status reports, none of which were particularly hopeful. The Superdome had lost part of its roof, and there were an estimated 10 to 15 thousand people inside. St. Bernard was under water. Slidell was the same. Talk began that the death toll could reach five figures.



Wednesday brought still no news about our family that stayed. The blame game started; government was abandoning the people in New Orleans. Questions of what was done wrong started to be uttered. My work geared up to help with information sharing. FEMA and Red Cross were buzzing with activity as they began a response on a scale never before needed. I spent the day buried in paperwork, trying to stay away from televisions and status reports.



Thursday, we finally heard from our family. Everyone was accounted for and well. Work kicked up for my husband and me. We got our first glimpse of how busy we would be in the coming days. Photos of the areas we lived in just seven months ago started popping up on television and the internet. I thought I had no love for the area, yet found myself taking it very personal. Memories were literally blown away and drowned in water. Luckily I had little time to dwell. Work was keeping me very busy. And it has stayed busy ever since. My in-laws' house that was on the market had two trees fall on it, much flood and wind damage, and may be a total loss. The house they were planning on buying once it was built was reduced to a roof on a pile of lumber. My parents' house did much better. There were some trees down and some dirt was washed from the foundation, but that was the extent of the damage. We still do not know the status of my brothers' houses, but have heard that one might be under water to the second floor. My mom's work has been completely destroyed. The second floor is now part of the first, the floor and ceiling collapsed for most of the suite. But we are the lucky. Our loss is nothing more than property. All loved ones are accounted for and well. This is not the case for many families from the Gulf Coast.



The effects of Katrina will be felt for years. Kids today will tell their grandchildren about that massive storm that flooded the bowl city of New Orleans, much like the elders today speak of Betsy and Camille. There will be less talk of "what if it happens" and more on "can we stop it from happening again". I cannot imagine New Orleans not being rebuilt, yet I know it will never be the same. I can only hope that it will come back better and stronger than ever.



***If you are interested in helping the recovery and response efforts, please visit [www.nvoad.org](http://www.nvoad.org) and select one of their national members to donate to. These organizations are all involved in helping those affected by Katrina.***

All photos in this article are personal photos of friends and family of Beth Campbell and are of areas mentioned in the text.