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Uprooted Katrina evacuees adjust to 'Burgh life

By Kacie Axsom TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Saturday, September 1, 2007

The day before Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast two years ago, Laurel Turner and her family fled their New Orleans home, taking three sets of clothes to stay with relatives in Houston.

"I wasn't going to go," Turner said. But upon realizing how formidable the storm had become, she changed her mind. "We're just glad we came out alive."

After a week in Texas, the family drove to Turner's brother's house in East Pittsburgh. Turner, 49, and her daughter, her husband and their two children now live in Findlay and are here to stay.

As many as 9,000 Katrina evacuees wound up in Pennsylvania after the New Orleans levees gave way on Aug. 29, 2005, immersing 80 percent of the city.

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Today, about 85 Katrina-displaced families in Allegheny County, and at least 100 in surrounding counties, are still receiving some assistance from area social agencies.

Some have settled in permanently, but others miss home and say they would go back to the Gulf Coast if they could.

Turner has put down roots in the Pittsburgh region. When she visited New Orleans last year, she found the "Lausat Place" sign that marked the street where her home stood in the city's Ninth Ward and brought it back to Pittsburgh. It hangs in the restaurant she opened in May: The Taste of New Orleans Cafe, on Main Street in East Pittsburgh.

"We ain't playin', we cookin'!" she said proudly, pointing to her restaurant's slogan on a card.

To supply the catering and take-out restaurant, they order spices and foods from New Orleans that are not available here. On the menu are jambalaya, gumbo and a specialty known as Katrina Bread Pudding.

"It truly mixed things up for us, so we named it after her," Turner said.

Her daughter, Kizzy Hatcher, 30, said she experienced some culture shock when she came to East Pittsburgh. She noticed that here, there are many different cultures and distinct neighborhoods, whereas in New Orleans, it was more mixed.

While she said she feels welcome here, she thinks people are more friendly in New Orleans.

"Back home, when we go to the store, the cashiers place the money into the customer's hand," she said. "Here they just slam it on the counter."

Turner heads the Gulf Coast Connection, a group under the umbrella of Family Resources, an East

Red room

Joe Appel/Tribune-Review

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Jambalaya

Joe Appel/Tribune-Review

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Liberty-based nonprofit. Gulf Coast Connection formed in November 2005, and about 200 evacuees met monthly. Many have moved back to the Gulf Coast, and about 30 still meet, she said.

Veronica Trybalski of Family Resources knows that for former Gulf Coast residents, life will never be the same. But she hopes her office can help them return to a new normal.

"When I go around and tell people what I do, people don't get there's still evacuees here," Trybalski said. "It takes a while to get back on your feet."

Family Resources maintains regular contact with about 20 evacuee families and intermittent contact with about 100.

Her office saw people who came from Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana. Most came to Pittsburgh because they had family here or were former residents. Others heard that Allegheny County had services to help them.

Wayne Rideout is a case manager with the Center for Community Resources in Butler to assist with Katrina victims. He will lose that position in mid-October, when the grant money that pays him will be phased out. Family Resources will take over his caseload.

"There's a real need for people to navigate the system," Rideout said. "These are real complex administrative systems. The way the government works is incomprehensible to ordinary folks."

As a case manager, he helps people get the resources they need. He helped one client find a service to get a wheelchair ramp built, and another to fill out forms to get money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for property losses.

Mark Poirrier was doing all he could to stay alive during the hurricane. As the floodwaters rose in his home in Plaquemines Parish, he climbed to the roof as the storm raged on.

A massive wave hit him, knocking him into the water. He got hit by a tree and was paralyzed from the waist down. Poirrier managed to swim 200 yards to his neighbor's roof, where he sat for 36 hours until the Coast Guard came for him.

"A few times, I didn't think I was going to survive when I kept going under water," he said. A part of a roof shingle hit him in the face, blinding him in one eye.

Today, Poirrier, 45, lives in Altoona with his father, a man he hadn't seen for four decades.

"Things are starting to look better," he said. He lives

in his father's living room, in a home that doesn't easily accommodate a wheelchair. He's trying to get an addition to his father's home, including an accessible bathroom, so he doesn't have to bathe out of a basin, or use a five-gallon bucket as a toilet.

Rideout has tried to help Poirrier get money from FEMA. He even took a video of Poirrier's home and submitted it to the television show "Extreme Home Makeover."

"The only thing I can say is I'm doing real good. I've got support from my church and my dad," he said. "He had a lot to go through with me."

Donna Jean Raines is grateful for the case managers at the Center for Community Resources.

"How scrambled our brains would have been!" she said, wondering what she would have done without their assistance.

Raines, 58, now lives in Butler. She had lived in Metairie, La., and rode out the storm in her boyfriend's home a few miles from her own.

"I'm expecting any minute just to get washed away, but it stopped," she said of the rising flood waters after the levees broke. Her apartment was destroyed.

She said she's thankful because all of her family and friends survived, and the material things don't seem to matter as much.

"It's sad saying goodbye to personal things," Raines said. "But some things aren't worth crying over."

She drove to the airport in Baton Rouge and flew to Pittsburgh where she met her daughter's family who lived here. Last year, Raines went to New Orleans for 12 days to visit friends and family. Since housing costs there are much higher than before, she couldn't stay.

"I think I will die here," Raines said. "I can't afford to live there."

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