

Despite Katrina's wrath, PRCC still present in Hancock County

PRCC students in Hancock Co. grateful to be back in school

Kate Craft of Bay St. Louis

I believe that Katrina had brought everyone down so far that the only way to go was up. I realized that I could not let this situation bring me down. I had to be strong and not give up on my dreams.

Although I am going to school in a trailer, I am grateful I am back. It amazes me how much the school didn't give up on getting the students back. Being at school is a privilege and I am very grateful.

Blaine LaFontaine of Bay St. Louis

Coming back to school is the closest I could get to normalcy, and since it is the only part of my life that wasn't blown away by the storm.

The word normal is a little far-fetched if that is what I were to say my life is like now because my family is now separated all over the country, and businesses and communities were obliterated.

School is the only thing that I can go to, excel in, and move forward with in my life for the time being, since everything else has come to a raging halt.

Amongst the awkward conditions I live in, the classroom is a place where my mind can focus and relax.

Melissa Martin

With the unexpected devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, returning to school was the last thing on my mind. But I was not going to let the devastation take the one thing I had left and that was my dreams. I have always let reasons stand in my way of not returning to school.

I decided that I had to want it bad enough to return, and I did. Even though life throws many curve balls and mother nature can knock us down, we can overcome by rising back above it and pursuing our dreams.

Josi Neacise of Kiln

Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast really hard, but it gave me a chance to realize just how fortunate my family and I were and how lucky we were to have one another. Luckily, I recovered from the storm fully. I returned to school because I knew that I had the means of going to school still available. My education is of the utmost of importance to me.

Michael Monju of Kiln

I came back to school to get away from all the storm-related stuff going on. At work and home there is still a lot of clean up to do. On the road all you see is clean-up crews. School is still the same. All we are expected to do is learn.

It gives us time to get our minds off everything going on right now. You can't let things like this mess up your life. There are also a lot of people living with me right now and getting away for a while helps.

Bethany Favre of Bay St. Louis

The devastation and stress Hurricane Katrina left behind was not going to change my mind about going to school.

I was not going to let Hurricane Katrina put anymore delays in my life than it already had. I was determined that I was going back to Pearl River Community College no matter how much damage Hurricane Katrina left behind.

I wanted to go back to college to achieve my goals to become a nurse. Hurricane Katrina changed my life enough, and I refuse to let this natural disaster hold my education and goals up.

Stacey LeSteur of Pearlinton

In the midst of Katrina's destruction, I made it my first priority to return to school because I refuse to put my future on hold due to a hurricane. I realized that if I did not return immediately (to school) that I might not return at all. It is incredibly easy to have a scapegoat to get out of school, especially in a time like this.

However, this is a perfect time to continue my education and have something to occupy my mind instead of drowning in self-pity. Furthermore, school is not all about learning but about making friendships as well.

School gives me a chance to make friends and hear other students' stories of loss and survival. After all, these are the friendships I am having to rely on since Katrina has scattered many of my friends, family, and former classmates all over the United States.



WAVELAND - Cleanup operations have been underway for some time at the Hancock Center, which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Plans are to have portable classrooms operational in the Center parking lot for the 2006 spring semester. Photo by Pamela Luke.

Experience with Katrina was a scary one

By TIFFANY WHITFIELD

Special to the Dixie Drawl

On Aug. 27, 2005, two days before Hurricane Katrina hit, my boyfriend, Jerrod, and I were visiting his family in Louisiana. That morning I had awakened to what I thought was going to be a normal Saturday, but, as we walked into the living room, we noticed that all of his family were gathered around the television.

They looked as if they were all in shock. We found out quickly that this was because a possible category five hurricane was headed our way. We were in Plaquemines Parish, La., the southern most point of Louisiana, and we were under mandatory evacuation.

That evening, Jerrod and I got our things together and headed for Picayune where my mother lives. When we got to Picayune, we were so exhausted that we ate and went straight to bed. On Sunday, we tried to get everything that might fly around tied down and put up, and then we sat around the television watching the news and wondering what we should do.

As Katrina strengthened, with every hour that passed, we decided it was too late to head north

and that we would have to ride it out at my mom's house. We went to bed that night and were awakened around 5 a.m. Monday morning from the sounds made by the strong winds and rain. Around 7 a.m., the rain was starting to really come down, and the wind was really picking up. The trees were breaking in half, and shingles and other debris were flying all over.

My mom got my little brother up and told us to get some things together and follow her to my Aunt Tina's house. She said we would be safer there because her sister's house is brick and did not have a lot of trees around it. My mom's house is wood and has large oaks around it. The drive over there was probably one of the scariest times of my life.

Normally, it only takes 10 minutes to get there, but this time it took us about 45 minutes to an hour. Trees and power lines were falling down all around us. It looked as if we were in an abandoned city, with hardly any people in sight. When we reached my aunt's house, we all ran in and sat down for awhile and told her about our drive over.

We wanted to go outside under her carport and watch, but the

weather was really unbelievable.

The trees were breaking in half, falling down, and being ripped right out of the ground. This all continued for hours, until suddenly everything was calm, and we realized that the eye of the storm was passing over us.

After a few minutes, everyone walked outside to look around at the damage. It was unbelievable!

Trees were blocking the streets, debris and other objects (shingles, wood, tin, shed, etc.) were everywhere. Some things were just totally ripped apart; a lot of homes were destroyed. The sight we saw was so sad, and the storm wasn't even over yet.

Jerrod and I went back inside and sat down on the couch, figuring the eye would be over soon.

That wasn't the case; the eye lasted about an hour, but it seemed like forever. We finally fell asleep, and when we awoke, the second half of the storm was hitting.

It was finally Monday evening, and the storm had ended, leaving devastation to many people.

Jerrod and I wanted to leave and go check on other family members. We had no phone service and could not get in touch with anyone, but we couldn't leave because

all the roads were blocked.

We had to stay at my aunt's house another night and just wait. The next day, some men with chainsaws cut a path through the roads, so everyone who lived in that area could get out.

It was so hot and no one had power; therefore, there was no hot water, and the showers were freezing cold. It was miserable. We decided to go to my dad's because he had a generator, and we could at least have some electricity. We were able to hook up an air conditioner, but we still had to take cold showers. We had to wash our clothes by hand.

Everyone was without power for at least two weeks. I was so thankful when we got it back. I did not realize how blessed we are to have the things we have. We take so many things for granted, such as, to be able to do all the day-to-day activities we do, watch television, take a hot shower, use appliances, go to the stores and buy things any time we want, go to restaurants, drive places, etc...

This has been an unforgettable experience, and even though it left so much devastation, it is now a big part of our history.

■ Tiffany Whitfield is a PRCC student from Hancock County.

Many were affected by Katrina's devastation

By KYLE BOEHL

Special to Dixie Drawl

Like many others, I too have suffered from the destruction left behind from Hurricane Katrina.

I never dreamed I would have had to evacuate my house; I never thought I would have had to wait to see what was left, and I could not conceive what awaited my arrival at my house or what was left of it.

People that were left with nothing may never return. Some others may never return in their fear of coming to their home to see nothing. The three steps for leaving the premises for a hurricane are evacuating, waiting, and returning.

When my family and I heard the evacuation warning for the hurricane we were not intending to go.

My mother had called the P.O.A. in front of Diamondhead to ask if we had to evacuate and they had said, "yes." We quickly packed our belongings and dogs, then left, thinking we would be back the next day.

We drove for six hours looking for a place to stay with no luck; we ended staying at a rest area near Mobile the first night. The next morning we drove to Montgomery and found a hotel to stay in.

We never thought we would be there for five days. We waited in torment awaiting word about Diamondhead, Mississippi.

We never got any information on what had happened because the news mainly covered New Orleans. After staying in the hotel for five nights, we decided to go to Cincinnati, Ohio, for refuge at my grandmother's house.

My family and I waited there for one week. My sister was being enrolled into a school there to keep up with her studies. Meanwhile, my parents and I were headed home towards Diamondhead.

Upon our arrival into Mississippi, we saw trees uprooted, downed power lines and mangled billboards. When we had arrived in Diamondhead, it was not the same.

All of the south side of Diamondhead had been destroyed. Family, friends, and many others had lost their homes, their livelihood, and some, their lives. When we arrived at our house, we saw that the house was still standing and that it only had a hole in the roof.

Once we unpacked, we began cleaning the yard of debris. One

week later, we went to go get my sister and bring her back.

A numerous amount of people had been affected by the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina.

Some people believed they could stay through this hurricane without being told to evacuate.

People never thought they would have to wait such a long, agonizing period of time to see what was left.

Most people returned and came to their residence to discover nothing, expecting to still have everything.

This trip home has been a life-changing experience for my family and others to think twice before thinking of staying in our houses during a hurricane.

■ Kyle Boehl is a PRCC student from Diamondhead.

Students see returning to school as sign of normalcy

Whitney Lewis of Picayune

The devastation of Hurricane Katrina had me wondering if I wanted to come back to school or not. I have lost my home along with the material things I once had. However, I could not just keep weeping about it; I had to have strength and continue doing what is best for me in the future.

Even though the disaster has brought me down, I still wanted to continue school. I wanted to continue school, so I could get my career started and live up to all my dreams. I also wanted to make my parents happy and accomplish a goal that they never had a chance to do. Everything happens for a reason, but through the grace of God I know I will make it through this disaster and be better for it.

Jessica Monju of Kiln

Aug. 29, 2005 was a day that changed my life forever. When I learned that our PRCC center was destroyed, it really upset me because I had already put college off for four years. Until I received the call that we would be resuming class, I was afraid that not everything in my life would be normal. Knowing that PRCC pulled everything together for us to keep continuing our dreams really means a lot to me.

Daphne Ladner of Kiln

Being out of school for six weeks was not an enjoyment. Every time the generator would crank, I would run to the TV to watch the bottom screen of WLOX news to see when PRCC would resume classes. I wanted to return to my normal routine of daily life. Finishing school is something that I am doing for my daughter, Braleigh, and me. Without PRCC I would not be whole.

Candace Ladner of Pass Christian

Returning to school was one of the first things on my mind after I knew that the storm had not damaged my home and that all of my family was safe. After all the devastation surrounding my community and all over the Gulf Coast, nothing seemed to be normal. Coming back to school would show a small piece of the beginning of reconstruction. Even though the Hancock Center was destroyed, classes resumed after a short, what I like to call, "break."

Devin Besancon of Waveland

After Hurricane Katrina hit, I thought I would never be able to get my life back how it was before. Katrina changed so much for my family and me. Then one day I got a letter in the mail saying school would reopen. I realized I would be able to at least start getting my life back to normal. Hurricane Katrina may have destroyed many things, but she did not destroy our hopes and dreams.

Chris Marshall of Long Beach

There are many reasons why I returned to school after Hurricane Katrina. I did not want anything to interrupt my education, including the biggest U.S. natural disaster in history, I did not want to lose my scholarship, and I don't want to let my family down. My family is expecting me to complete college.

Brett Breland of Waveland

Because of the extensive damage Hurricane Katrina did to my home and the Hancock Center, I thought that there would be no school for about a year. When I found out that we were going to actually have classes, I was thrilled. School, my family, and my friends are all that I really had left. School is my top priority. Even though Hurricane Katrina took my things, it will never take my dreams.

Mike Williamson of Kiln

When classes resumed so did I. I did so because I want to attain what I started towards, a degree in Engineering. When I successfully finish school and go back into the working world, I hope to be well off when I am forced to retire.

Kevin Schaumburg of Waveland

I decided to return to school after the storm because I knew the longer I waited the harder it would be to return to school.

Wesley Oliver of Kiln

I came back to school because it got my mind off all the damage. It was hard sitting around all day with nothing to do and just looking at stuff that used to be standing. I came back to school to finish up and then transfer to a university to make my life better.

Hancock sessions

Pearl River Community College counselor Jim Moore helps nursing student Joanna Tebo of Picayune with her spring 2006 schedule. Moore spent two days earlier this month helping students arrange their schedules in the trailer that serves as the Hancock Center at Stennis International Airport. The trailer has two classrooms, one bathroom, and a closet-size office. English instructor and Hancock Center interim director, Maggie Smith, uses the office to plan classes and as a miniature library.

