

★ H U R R I C A N E K A T R I N A ★

Some PRCC employees suffer severe damages



Academic Counselor Ethel Batson's home in Poplarville suffered extensive interior damage.



English instructor Greg Underwood's home in Hattiesburg.

'Year of the Hurricane' won't soon be forgotten

By Jackie Magee
Dixie Drawl Staff Writer

My parents went through Hurricane Camille. Every time there is a hurricane that could possibly hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast, I hear about Camille.

My mother rode Camille out underneath her family's kitchen table with her sister and brothers. My father stayed with his family on their farm. They had no electricity for four weeks. I do not think anyone imagined a hurricane could ever hit the Gulf so hard again 35 years later.

Unfortunately, Hurricane Katrina did hit the Gulf Coast, and I got to see firsthand what a major hurricane can do to the region I know and I love.

On Sunday, Aug. 28, my dad, Scott, woke me up at 7 o'clock in the morning. The TV was blaring reports about the size and strength of Katrina. My mother, Lisa, was being discharged from the hospital and I had to go get her from Piquayune before Highway 11 became packed with evacuees.

Interstate 59 had been opened for contraflow the day before. As I passed through town an hour later, Poplarville was bustling. The gas stations were packed. The grocery stores were quickly going through their stock. After getting my mom home, I headed to the grocery store. I managed to get my family enough sandwich food for two or three days.

My dad had made the executive decision to leave our home in town and ride the storm out at a friend's house on Highway 53, 10 miles south of Poplarville. None of us wanted to leave.

The house we were living in is my grandmother's and it had survived Camille. My mom said, "If the house can survive Camille, it can survive Katrina." We left the house without even boarding a single window with wood. I packed everything I could fit into my car.

On Monday, Aug. 29, Hurricane Katrina hit the coast. I woke up that morning to the sounds of harsh winds and stinging rains. All through the day, I watched the trees being uprooted by the winds. I stood outside on the porch and looked on helplessly as the barns were torn apart and shingles were ripped off the roof. I saw two huge tree limbs fall in the very spot I had parked my car the day before.

Thankfully, I had moved it to an open field before the wrath of the storm really hit. Later in the day, when the storm had calmed down, my family and I ventured out into the unknown.

The small piece of country land that we were on had only suffered some tree damage. A couple of

barns were torn to pieces and there was some damage to the houses. I will admit, I have never had so much fun riding four wheelers as I have that day!

Tuesday morning, my family and I headed into town. We had a small caravan of six cars making our way up Highway 53. The normal drive to Poplarville is 10 minutes. It took us an hour to dodge all of the trees and power lines that covered the road. A small path had been cleared the day before, but I still had to watch out for live power lines and branches that could scratch my car. The destruction was magnificent.

Trees had been uprooted and houses and businesses were damaged. Downtown Poplarville did not look like downtown Poplarville. Windows were blown in, awnings were on the street, and buildings had holes. When my family and I got to my grandmother's house in Poplarville, we all cried a huge sigh of relief. Luckily, we had not sustained any damage. We did not even lose a tree or have a cracked window.

After I found out that our house was okay, I immediately began to worry about my friends. I had not heard from a single person because of the cell phone service being out. I desperately wanted to go to their houses and check on them, but I also could not afford to waste my precious tank of gas in my car. A world of uncertainty began to set in. When would my life go back to normal?

My father decided it was necessary to take my mother, grandmother, cousin, and uncle to my aunt's house in Houston, Texas. My mother needed to be somewhere comfortable where she could recover from her surgery, especially since electricity had been wiped out. Wednesday morning, my family headed to Texas. The drive from Poplarville to Baton Rouge, La., was jaw-dropping.

Houses were destroyed, cars were smashed, and debris covered the landscape. I have never seen anything so horrific in my entire life.

In Baton Rouge, I had my first look at a picture of New Orleans while my dad filled up his gas tank. In a McDonald's, I talked to several people who lost everything they owned in New Orleans. I knew in that instant how incredibly lucky I was to have a roof over my head and clothes in my closet. In Houston, my dad and I headed to Wal-Mart to stock up on supplies. We bought enough canned food, water, and bread to last us several weeks. We were also in need of gas cans and a generator, but there were none to be found. I was amazed that the effect of Katrina hit all the way to Houston.



Public Relations Associate Pam Luke's husband is dwarfed by the root of tree that caused damage.

Thursday morning we headed home. On Interstate 10, we passed over a hundred power trucks, heading our way. I waved to each one, in a gesture of thank you. We also passed over 80 buses of refugees heading to Houston from the Superdome.

At home, the first place I went was Poplarville Baptist Church. I knew that there was some way I could help someone else through this destruction. On Friday and Saturday, I was put to work cleaning up the church and cooking. On those two days alone, I saw the beauty of helping souls. The men and women at the Baptist church gave all of their time to take care of five older men and women with special needs. These people could have left and gone home, but they stayed to help someone else. I saw neighbors helping other neighbors clean up their homes and yards.

I finally got to see my best friend, Kaly, on Saturday afternoon and I tell you, I have never been so happy to see her before. We hugged and we talked about everything we had been through. Kaly lost her house but we had not lost our jobs. Deb's Four Star Pizza and Pasta, where we both work, would be open for business as soon as we got electricity up and running. On Tuesday, Sept. 6, I went back to work wait-

ing tables. I did not know most of the people who came in. They were electricity workers, clean up crews, military, policemen, and firemen from different states. The best part about my job was that I got to meet these people who have come to help Poplarville.

Until Katrina, I had never really understood how a person could be humbled. Now, I can say that I have been humbled. I now know what it is like to see the wrath and fury of nature, and I shall never underestimate it again. For a few weeks, I saw the normalcy of my life and my world ripped up. For a few seconds, I thought that my life was on still for a while. And then I realized, situations like this don't put your life on hold. Experiences like this only make your life more interesting and your resolve a little bit stronger.

Hurricanes like this are a part of our life, and looking back, I can only see positive aspects of the storm. Family and friends are alive. Homes and businesses can be repaired or rebuilt. I have learned to appreciate and be thankful with what I got. Life is good, even in the year of the hurricane.

■ Jackie Magee is a sophomore student from Poplarville.

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Indeed, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, causing more damage and killing more people than any storm in American history. Katrina has been called the worst natural disaster to ever hit the United States.

Campus was secure

Campus Police at PRCC were on the job around the clock.

"Ken Winters was here constantly throughout the storm," said Dr. Adam Breerwood, Director of Student Services. "He and Bob Marble worked close to 15 hours a day for two weeks, making sure the campus was safe and secure. They all deserve some accolades."

According to Charlie Kindja, chief of Campus Police, officers not only secured the damaged buildings, but they kept emergency generators running on campus. He said Winters worked 109 hours of overtime during the storm, Marble 90 hours over and, himself, 70 hours over.

Said Breerwood, "I am very proud of the jobs those guys did for us."

Athletic facilities damaged

Sports facilities at Pearl River Community College took some major hits from Katrina.

The press box at Dobie Holden Stadium was wiped out and the football scoreboard was damaged.

The roof on the grandstand at the baseball field was ripped off, the first base dugout was destroyed and one of the light poles fell down. The outfield fence suffered extensive damage.

Both dugouts and the scoreboard at the Lady Wildcat softball field were destroyed, as were the scoreboard and grandstand for the soccer field. The fence around the tennis courts was damaged. And the roof and the floor at Shivers Gym have to be replaced.

But all those pale in comparison to the damage at White Coliseum, home of the basketball Wildcats and Lady Wildcats, as well as the football coaches' offices,

dressing rooms, weight room, training room, classrooms, etc.

Plans are for the Wildcats to play most of their home basketball games at nearby Poplarville High School. As for spring and summer graduations and the annual fund-raising Extravaganza, temporary homes will have to be found.

Hancock Center demolished

Dr. Lewis said even though the brunt of the school's damages were on the Poplarville main campus, the Forrest County Center and Lowery Woodall Advanced Technology Center in Hattiesburg and the Hancock Center in Waveland did not come through the storm unscathed.

"Our centers in Hattiesburg had minimal damage, including some downed trees and some roof and water problems, but nothing major," said Dr. Lewis. Classes resumed there the week of Sept. 12.

The Hancock Center, located on U.S. 90, was basically destroyed. Tapper said 8-10 feet of water passed through the facility, destroying everything inside. Portable classrooms are being shipped to Hancock County. Fall semester classes are to resume Monday, Oct. 3, possibly at Stennis International Airport, according to Dr. John Grant, Vice President for Instruction.

As for the new Aviation program at Stennis, Tapper said the classroom trailer there washed off its blocks. The hanger had four feet of water inside.

Road to recovery begins

Immediately after the storm, PRCC officials began the road to recovery - aggressively.

Members of the administrative council, who could get to campus, began meeting to map out plans.

Disaster Services Inc. of Atlanta, Ga., arrived and began airing out all the buildings. Debris cleanup got underway quickly.

Power to the campus was restored within a week of the storm.

History was made Monday, Sept. 5, when President George Bush became the first sitting president to ever

set foot on the PRCC campus.

In a response to criticism his administration has been slow to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina, President Bush arrived at the PRCC Technology Center with praise for local relief efforts and assurances more federal help is on the way.

"Mississippi is on my mind," Bush said. "We are with you. That is what I want you to know."

Speaking to about 250 elected state and local officials, including Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, U.S. Sen. Trent Lott, and U.S. Rep. Chip Pickering, gathered at PRCC, the president praised local relief efforts. AYou showed courage," he said. APeople have risked their lives to help."

Dr. Lewis briefed PRCC employees about storm damage in meetings in Hattiesburg (Sept. 8) and Poplarville (Sept. 9). Students living on campus began moving back in on Sunday, Sept. 18. Classes resumed the next day.

Many returning dormitory students faced some temporary challenges.

Said Breerwood, "We lost 80 beds in Marion Hall and about 20 beds in Huff Hall. So we had to combine some students into housing combinations. We also had some Hancock County students who were commuting to classes, but lost their homes, and needed us to find room for them.

"That meant putting three students in one room. All of our students have been very understanding and cooperative. Some of them brought extra sheets and clothes for those students who lost everything."

Once repairs are made to those dorm rooms, students can move back in. Repairs could take six to eight weeks.

Most of the damage to the dorm rooms came from water. The school immediately purchased 75 new mattresses from a manufacturer and Camp Shelby loaned the school 40 sets of bunk beds.

Meanwhile, Tapper said PRCC has had a lot of help from a lot of people. He listed the U.S. Army, the Corps of Engineers, the Seabees and others.

Dr. Lewis said several other community colleges have come to the aid of PRCC. Among them Copiah-Lincoln, Itawamba, East Central, Mississippi Delta, Hinds and Northwest. Said Dr. Lewis, "Some of their skilled workers, like carpenters, electricians and plumbers are here lending us a hand."

Added Tapper, "Without the help of these workers from the other community colleges, we would not have been able to make it in time to resume classes when we did."

A dozen portable classrooms arrived on the main campus. The Department of Fine Arts and Communication classes will be held in some of those portable facilities. Some will be used as office space. They are scheduled to be hooked up sometime in October.

Since classes were suspended, changes have been made to the 2005 Fall Semester calendar. The schedule of classes on the Poplarville campus has also been revised.

Students can check the PRCC website (www.prcc.edu) for those changes.

Before Hurricane Katrina hit on Monday, Aug. 29, enrollment at PRCC had reached an all-time high of more than 4,300 students, or up 4 percent from a year ago.

"We've got a lot of challenges and a lot of issues to face," said Dr. Lewis. "We are all adapting to the situation. We will recover from Hurricane Katrina and be stronger than before."

Katrina will be long remembered

Was Hurricane Katrina the perfect storm? News reports said she didn't rise to the absolute worst-case scenario that could be imagined. Shortly before she made landfall, weakened slightly - from a Category 5 in the Gulf of Mexico to a Category 4 - before it struck South Mississippi.

Yes, it could have been worse.

As we approach "normal," with a season-opening football win to pump our saddened hearts, we have only to see how much worse it could have been.