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Contending with Katrina

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Two Illinois Wesleyan alumni battled through the aftermath of a natural disaster of historic proportions.

Story by Rachel Hatch

> **"The 17th Street Canal? That was my neighborhood. That bridge they kept showing? I took that bridge to work everyday." — John Peterson '75**

The threat of an impending hurricane was nothing new to John Peterson '75, a New Orleans resident for almost 30 years. He boarded the windows on his home near the 17th Street Canal as well as two rental properties he and his wife Sydna owned. They cleared away the deck furniture and filled their car with gas.

"This was no big surprise," Peterson said of the evacuation of New Orleans. "We've been through hurricanes before."

The Petersons planned to visit their daughter, Abbey, at her college in northern Louisiana until the storm blew over. Yet they were in no rush to leave. "We packed three or four pairs of clothes, almost like going to visit friends for the weekend," he said. The couple even visited their prospective places of employment on the morning of Saturday, Aug. 27, before joining the mass exodus of residents on the packed highways. "It usually takes us four hours to reach Abbey," said Peterson. "This time it took us eight hours."

Hurricane Katrina rolled with a fury onto the coastal United States on Monday, Aug. 29. A breach in the New Orleans' Industrial Canal meant newscasters who reported from the city stood ankle-deep in water. "That wasn't unusual," said Peterson, watching the news from his daughter's apartment hours away. "We knew that could be pumped out in a day." Yet the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was anything but usual.

New Orleans is an odd city, geographically speaking. Mostly built below sea level, it is nestled between Lake Pontchartrain and the mighty Mississippi. To contain the water on either side is a series of earthen and concrete levees holding up canals — levees made to stand up to a hurricane of category 3 (on a scale of one to five) intensity. Katrina was ranked between categories 4 and 5, with winds that reached 175 miles an hour.

Living near New Orleans' 17th Street Canal, John and Sydna Peterson have seen their share of flooding, but nothing could prepare them for what happened

in the wake of Katrina.

While Peterson slept early Tuesday morning, water seeped over the 17th Street Canal, weakening its earthen base. At 1:30 a.m., a two-block-long section of the levee was breached and water poured into the neighborhoods known as the West End. Some homes were completely submerged, while the roofs of others appeared to float above the murky waters.

When he woke on Tuesday, Peterson called his mother to let her know he and his wife would be staying with their daughter and then head home in a day or so. “She got real quiet and then said, ‘Have you watched the news?’”

The images of the city he called home were plastered all across the television. “The 17th Street Canal? That was my neighborhood. That bridge they kept showing? I took that bridge to work everyday,” he said. “It was shocking.”

The entire nation was shocked in the days that followed as network and cable news channels featured non-stop coverage of devastation in New Orleans and throughout the central gulf coast region. The death toll now stands at 1,302 and damage is estimated at between $70 to $130 billion, making Katrina the most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history. Over a million people were displaced.

In New Orleans, authorities closed the city to evacuated residents, but in mid-September, Peterson sneaked back to his home. “My brother-in-law works at a girls’ school, and he had to meet with his insurance people,” he said. “I went with him and drove back to my place.”

It was a beautiful day in New Orleans, he recalled, yet the city was blanketed in an eerie silence. “It was a scene out of one of those movies where the world ends,” said Peterson. Other than police and military personnel, Peterson said he saw only two people in two hours.

Perhaps more surreal was the drive down his street, seeing houses standing. “They looked normal,” except for the residual markings of the waterline that stood eight feet off the ground, said Peterson.

The Petersons' cherished antiques and other furniture were damaged by mold.

Inside his house was a different story. Through the darkness created by the boarded-up windows, Peterson caught glimpses of the damage. “I was amazed,” he said. “It was so uneven. Our piano had moved five or six feet and was on its side, but the dining room table must have floated right where it was. Even the tablecloth and candles were still in place.”

Though the house stands, engineers will have to determine if it is structurally sound enough to be livable. “We’ll wait to see what the engineer says, then we’ll decide if it can be repaired,” said Peterson. If the house can be rescued, Peterson and his wife will have to deal with a new resident — mold. “It’s everywhere from the standing water,” he observed. Still, it appeared that several pieces of antique furniture, heirlooms from his wife’s family, appeared “fixable.”

Katrina took more than the place where the Petersons live; it also took their livelihood. “It felt weird to file for unemployment,” said Peterson, a top salesman at Allied Paper Company. Though the business still stands in Jefferson Parish, the customers are gone. “There is no one to sell to,” he said simply.

Even with the destruction, Peterson and his wife count themselves lucky — at least they had a place to go. The couple spent several weeks visiting relatives on the East Coast and in Illinois, even taking time to attend IWU’s

October Homecoming, where Peterson reunited with several of his Theta Chi pledge brothers. In early November, they returned to Louisiana, staying with friends in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans. Peterson said their plan was to eventually move back into one of their two rental properties that sustained less water damage. Volunteers from his church are helping in the renovation effort.

Upon their return, Peterson and his wife took a stroll through the famous French Quarter and saw it filled with people — only on closer inspection was it appararent that most were construction and relief workers. He knows it will be a long time before the city he loves, or his life there, returns to anything approaching what it was before Katrina.

"Everything will be up in the air for the next few months, and it's the unknown that's frustrating," Peterson said. "But the important things in life are good. We're here and we're okay."

"I worked 24 hours my first shift. I remember looking at my watch and thinking, 'Is that 7 a.m. or 7 p.m.?'" — Scott Zeller '82

Just as the shock of seeing the floodwaters was hitting John Peterson, the phone of Scott Zeller '82 was ringing.

Chief of emergency psychiatric medicine at John George Psychiatric Pavilion near Oakland, Calif., Zeller is also a vice president of the American Association of Emergency Psychiatry. A team from AAEP was forming to assist the psychiatric needs of thousands of people who were being temporarily housed at the Astrodome in Houston. Accepting the offer to head this team, Zeller soon found himself on a plane to Texas.

"A lot of psychiatrists are interested in having a nice, quiet outpatient practice," said Zeller. "Then there are those of us who are more of the 'cowboy segment,'" he added with a laugh. "We do well in a fast-paced environment."

Zeller is used to fast-paced. The emergency room where he works sees more than 10,000 psychiatric cases a year, making it one of the busiest in the nation. "We're kind of the Cook County Hospital of Oakland and Berkeley," he said. He has worked with survivors of the 1989 San Francisco earthquake and the Oakland-Berkeley Hills fire of 1991, in which thousands of people lost everything. "But perhaps nothing compared to the magnitude of Katrina," he said.

On Sept. 4, Zeller and the two other psychiatrists on his team were placed in a makeshift clinic and hospital housed in the Reliant Arena, which is part of a huge complex that includes the Astrodome and Reliant Stadium. Zeller and the other doctors worked 16-hour shifts and saw 75 to 100 patients a day in need of immediate psychiatric care.

A priority was to get people their prescription medications, which had been donated by several pharmaceutical companies. “Many of these people had been off their medications for a week,” said Zeller, who encountered patients hearing voices or feeling suicidal. Often he spoke with people who had been trapped in their homes as the water rose. “They were forced to punch through the roofs in hopes of being rescued. Compound that to the stress of losing everything, and you have people who are physically and mentally exhausted,” he said.

Scott Zeller and colleagues set up a makeshift psychiatric clinic where doctors treated hundreds of patients, many suffering from stress.

As the team labored to assist the many people in need of help, time slipped away. “Under the constant humming of the fluorescent lights, you couldn’t tell whether it was day or night,” said Zeller. “I worked 24 hours my first shift. I remember looking at my watch and thinking, ‘Is that 7 a.m. or 7 p.m.?’” Faced with little sleep, no running water, and no sunshine, the volunteers began to resemble the evacuees, said Zeller. “No one complained because we knew it was nothing compared to what they had lost, but some of the volunteers began to look almost as shell-shocked as the evacuees. It was a macabre experience.”

One of the few releases came with the sound of electric cars zipping under the thousands of cots. “Dodge gave all the children these electric cars,” said Zeller. “There were tons and tons of kids. They played and jumped on cots. I think many of them thought of it as an adventure; they didn’t know what a tragedy they had been through.”

Though many of the evacuees spent the first few weeks in shock or putting on a good show of strength for their children, Zeller said the grief would come. “It will take a bit, but over the next few months it will hit them and they will realize the enormity of what they have lost,” he said. He hopes people will turn to mental health professionals, and that those professionals will “step up,” Zeller stated. “If everyone took two patients pro bono, then I think we could get through all of this a lot easier.”

Over the course of the week that he was there, the Astrodome gradually began to empty out as people displaced by Katrina moved to other cities or were relocated in homes and smaller shelters. Zeller, too, returned to Oakland — but, for a while, his dreams led him back to Houston. “I was acclimating to home just fine, but each night I would dream I was still working at the Astrodome. I woke up feeling like I had worked all night.”

Zeller is glad he was able to help in Houston. “It’s really nice to give something back,” he said, remembering how the looks of fear, confusion, or stress on the faces of people who came to him for help were gradually replaced by smiles of gratitude. “I hope everyone will volunteer and make a difference in whatever way they can.”