Katrina survivor nine years after tragedy

By: Isabel Freedman



Angelique McKenna, age 19, grows beyond Katrina

ELON, NC -- “I walked out of the house with only four outfits in my pink roller bag. I did not realize what was about to happen. No one did.”

August 25, 2005 was a hot and sticky night in New Orleans when ten-year-old Angelique McKenna and her family left their home, not knowing that it would be their last time. McKenna hated long car rides because they forced her to sit still. They were about the only thing that dampened her loud, energetic personality and made her feel antsy and irritable.

She had gone through the drill for evacuations before. As miserable as it was, she was familiar with the 20-hour bumper- to-bumper traffic to Houston, Texas- the family’s temporary home during earlier emergencies.

However, that night, the night that Hurricane Katrina hit, they were not driving to Texas. McKenna, her mother and her sisters drove to Alexandria, Virginia to stay with their neighbors’ relatives. At the time, they did not know that what they expected to be a short visit would turn into six months of living in and out of hotel rooms and with various friends.

In the late afternoon of Monday, August 29, McKenna was chasing her dog around the house when she heard her older sister shriek from the living room of their friends’ home.

Giddy and out of breath, McKenna skipped into the small room to find her family and their hosts gathered around a tiny television set.

Nine years later, McKenna still remembers the traumatizing sharp images on that screen. Although calm and collected, she shifted uneasily in her seat as she described to her interviewer: “I wondered. Did I know anyone? Have I been there before? Was that the local grocery store, or the pet store? I could not tell. I could not see past the floating furniture, the mangled pieces of clothing and the people gathered on the rooftops of their homes, ” she said. “The only place I knew was unrecognizable. I remember trying to find a familiar place - a convenience store, or maybe the movie theater. I couldn’t.”

She went on. “In a normal situation I would be the first one to annoy my mom with pressing questions,” she said, looking down at her hands. “That time though, I kept quiet. I kept my mouth shut for a very long time.”

McKenna and her family were quite fortunate. The Uptown district where they had moved just weeks before the storm had survived with barely any damage. But the home that they had just left received 10 feet of water, and was never rebuilt.

The aftermath of hurricane Katrina was difficult for Angelique to understand and accept. Looking back at that point in her life she recalled: “The city wasn’t livable anymore. Not only was it in a state of turmoil, the spirit of the entire city was gone. Schools were shut down, local restaurants, retail stores, and so many other places that once thrived. Everyone was trying to live a normal life, but there was an elephant in the room. Everyone was wondering what to do next,” she said.

Months after the hurricane, McKenna and her family were still living in FEMA- funded hotel rooms in Annapolis, Maryland. McKenna recalled that, even at the time, she felt incredibly fortunate to have gotten out of the situation so quickly, compared to her a few of her friends who were still struggling back in New Orleans. She kept in touch with one of her closest friends who continued to live in a trailer for months after Katrina.

When she started going to the charter school in her new neighborhood, she experienced the generosity and kindness of her classmates. They reached out to her with friendliness and warmth, and provided her with new clothing and school supplies.

“I had never been shy before in my entire life, but after Katrina, I withdrew from my loud and outgoing self,” she remembered. “I took it harder than my sisters did, the simple acts of human kindness and acknowledgment went a long way. People were very hospitable and understanding. I gradually became myself again, “ she said softly. Eventually, in her freshman year of high school, she and her sister started a club to help return unsettled New Orleans residents to their homes.

McKenna is now a 19-year-old sophomore at Elon University in North Carolina. Two of her close friends there, Laura Saeli and Ashley Lucas, spoke highly of her charismatic personality and strong character.

“When I first met Angelique, there was something about her that seemed solid. She is the type of person I could trust right off the bat,” said Lucas. Saeli saw motivation and passion in McKenna. “She seemed so dedicated and focused in the communications class we had together,” said Saeli. “She was very concerned in particular about impoverished and other struggling people around the world.”

Out of class, McKenna spends a lot of her time volunteering at the Allied Churches of Alamance County, a local homeless shelter, and assisting at philanthropic events for her sorority.

After experiencing the loss of her home at the young age of 10, McKenna developed a fear of having to go through another similar situation.

During February of last year, she was doing homework in her room when the power went out. A pit in her stomach started to form. “I knew that we had to leave during a power outage for safety reasons. I just did not like the anxiety that I felt when I packed my bag in the dark room, the strange emotions that were flooding back to me,” she said.

She also felt overwhelmingly frustrated at how her fellow suitemates treated the situation.

“I remember hearing someone complain about how she wouldn’t be able to straighten her hair in the morning, and I thought to myself, ‘how could someone be thinking like this? Do I say something?’”

“I have a fear of losing my home. I was frustrated that people were complaining so much about something that would be over in the next couple of hours. I know that people did not mean to come off that way, but it was hard for me to hear things like that, “ she said.

McKenna explained that Hurricane Katrina taught her life lessons that she abides by every day. She said she realizes that there are far more important things in life than the material items that people are often obsessed with.

When Katrina hit, it took people’s material possessions – their favorite sweaters, their new plasma TVs, the cars in their driveways. When those were gone, it was up to the people of New Orleans to decide whether they had anything of value left. In a confident, calm voice, McKenna tried to explain.

“Nothing lasts forever. You invest your time and efforts into making relationships instead of worrying about material items. The place that you call home, that you depend on to feel comfort and safety, does not last forever. For my family and I, all those things were gone, but we had each other.”