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KATRINA: THE AFTERMATH



KETH HADLEY / Staff

Steve and Ellen Fix of Dunwoody were displaced from their home by the Dunwoody tornado of 1998. When they saw the same thing happen to folks in New Orleans, they made a few calls and lined up a family of four — the Pattersons, strangers — to move in with them for a while. Left to right: Jessica Patterson, 11; Steve Fix; Andre Patterson; Jasmine Patterson, 15; Raphi Fix, 14; Ellen Fix, Lorena Patterson; and Shayna Fix, 12.

Room to share

Room to spare

By ELLEN FIX

Eleven-year-old Jessica Patterson leans closer to me as she pushes a few buttons on her mom's cellphone. She scrolls through a few family photos



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until a small brick home pops up on the tiny screen. "See, there's our house, right there." And then another view, of the back of the house. "And there's our yard."

The Patterson home, one mile from Lake Pontchartrain, is — like every other house in East New Orleans — under water. And — like tens of thousands of other New Orleans residents — the Pattersons sought refuge in Atlanta.

My daughter had heard the public service announcement on a local radio station. Do you need housing? Can you offer housing? Call this number. When I dialed, I was directed not to a government agency, not to an official entity. It was just

Atlanta family invites strangers to live with them

someone, like me, who wanted to help. Someone who, like me, was horrified by the images of suffering that Gulf Coast residents had endured for days — shocked that, even as American troops were handing out supplies to Iraqi children, we couldn't keep New Orleans residents alive.

The images pulled at me. I wanted to be there, in a boat, plucking people from rooftops. I wanted to be there, giving them food and water. But my husband and I have jobs and our kids are in school. We have little time to volunteer. The one thing we could do was open up our Dunwoody home, and offer shelter from the storm.

The call came on Labor Day. A "match" had been found. I dialed the cell number with the 504 area code. On the other end was a sweet, soft

INSIDE

► Duke students go to Louisiana on rescue mission, E3

voice with a twinge of New Orleans drawl. Like us, they had two children. They were staying in a house in College Park "with about 20 people" — extended family. They had evacuated before the hurricane hit, grabbing enough clothes for a couple of nights. They figured they'd be back. But then the plan changed. Their home was gone. Their city was submerged. They wanted to start a new life in Atlanta.



Lorena Patterson has temporary use of a car from Alamo Car Rental, her former employer in New Orleans. What does your husband do? She hesitates, the words coming haltingly, as if she can't remember. Under other circumstances, I would have found this puzzling. But I know the feeling of utter disorientation and confusion

► Please see STRANGERS, E3

Strangers: Dunwoody far

► Continued from E1

that comes from losing a home and being suddenly uprooted. Our own home was smashed in 1998 by a tornado that ripped through our neighborhood. In the aftermath, I could barely remember my own name. Lorena, in my mind, was thoroughly excused.

Finally, the words come. Andre does independent contract work in assembly, forklift and warehouse supervision. For six years, he was an assistant manager at the New Orleans Convention Center. He often takes on assignments out of state. Since Katrina, he hasn't had time to think much about working. He's simply trying to hold his family together and get their lives in order.

We meet and take them to lunch. They are ravenous — and appreciative. I say something about "refugees." Andre is quick to correct me. "No, don't say that, we're not refugees at all. That means something else. We're 'displaced citizens.'"

Jasmine, 15, is shy and quiet. Her outgoing sister Jessica says she feels like she's seen me before. Lorena smiles readily. Andre likes to laugh. I ask: Do you smoke? No, says Andre. But he likes to smoke an occasional cigar — outside, of course. (Just like my husband.) Do you stay up late at night? Yeah, we love to watch "Fam-

ily Guy." (Just like we do.) And suddenly, these people we've never met are no longer strangers. Differences of upbringing, background and culture dissolve amid the basic human desires to share, to help, to be a part of a community.

We introduce them to their living quarters in our basement. There's a queen sleeper sofa. An adjacent room with sleeping bags for the kids. A private bath. A TV set. A computer. And the use of our kitchen and the rest of the house. It's luxury compared with where they were before. Best of all, it's uncrowded.

They relax. Andre falls asleep, exhausted, on the couch. It's little wonder — he spends his days making umpteen phone calls, making arrangements with his mortgage company, insurance firms, adjusters, FEMA, the Social Security office. Not only that, but Lorena and Andre have been caring for her 89-year-old father, still in College Park, who is on dialysis and has a failing kidney.

He saw his longtime family home under water on TV, and he experienced a setback. In the next few days, they'll need to admit him to the hospital. Yet Andre is optimistic about the future. "If you don't have a positive attitude, you'll go crazy."

It dawns on me that the Fix family food budget won't easily handle an additional four people. I call the Salvation Army on North Druid Hills. They're providing for Katrina victims until 5:30. So I pile my daughter, Lorena and her daughter Jessica into my car, and off we go.

Surprisingly, the Salvation Army runs like clockwork. Volunteers scurry to help someone empty an SUV filled with an array of donations, including a computer, a baby's car seat, clothes and other items. A young man signs up to join the volunteers. And we are quickly

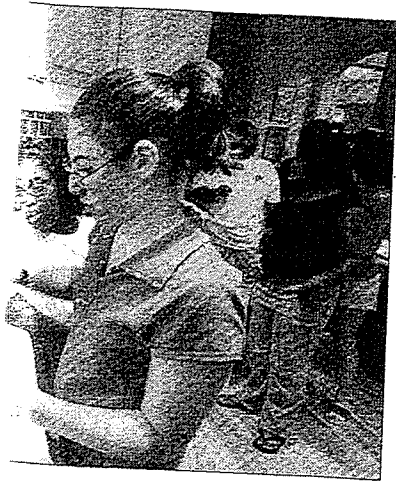


Jessica Patterson watches Shayna [unclear] two families in the Fix kitchen in Dunwoody. The Fix family realized their food budget couldn't handle an additional four people, so they called the Salvation Army, which loaded them up with g

nily invites four to move in

ushered through a room filled with bags of supplies to a receiving table. Lorena fills out forms. The volunteer asks, how many people in your family? What are their ages and sex? Do you need housing? Do you need to see a doctor?

Five minutes later, Lorena is handed four bags filled with personal hygiene items. Besides soap, towels, shaving cream, toothpaste, toothbrushes, and feminine products, there's an Elmo doll and a soft, fuzzy, stuffed Rainbow Fish — a token of much-needed warmth and comfort for the kids. Lorena, who takes medication to prevent seizures,



KEITH HADLEY / Staff

yna Fix prepare dinner for the Dunwoody on Thursday. When budget would need an assist e, they called on the Salvation groceries and toiletries.

chats with the Salvation Army staff doctor, a young woman in medical blues who has just informed another evacuee that her husband, a diabetic, has extremely high blood pressure and needs to be treated at a hospital. Fortunately, Lorena's Walgreen prescription can easily be refilled locally. Minutes later, we receive two huge boxes filled with non-perishable food, and on the way out a man asks whether we need any bread. Sure. He loads us up with four loaves of Publix French bread. As we leave, some 20 evacuees arrive to stay the night.

The Salvation Army also gives Lorena clothing vouchers for the Salvation Army Store on North Avenue downtown. But her family needs clothes now, so we head to Wal-Mart. A skirt and blouse for her, pajamas for the kids — she says she'll let Andre deal with buying the kids shoes later. Jessica finds a computer game she wants. "No," her mother says firmly. "We're not going to do that now. Put it back." Oblivious to the disaster's financial impact on her family, Jessica is enjoying Wal-Mart as if it were just another shopping day.

Before dinner, my daughter and Jessica play Scrabble. Then Jessica pitches in to help me peel potatoes for dinner. Putting her arms around my

waist, she says, "I want to help. I know how to do that!"

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The Pattersons spend most of the next afternoon waiting with thousands of other evacuees in a line at the Red Cross headquarters on Monroe Drive. Sadly, all they have to show for their hours in line is a tiny piece of yellow scratch paper with four digits scribbled on it — because the Red Cross ran out of the treasured monetary vouchers, forcing them to return another day. Yet amazingly, Jessica runs into a good friend while in line. And Andre meets a guy who graduated high school with him. It was like old home week for New Orleans residents. And it reminds the Pattersons of what they miss most about home: friends and family. "It's a family town," says Andre. "You just get in the car and stop by the relatives' New Orleans is really a close-knit town. Now, we're all scattered everywhere."

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It's getting late, almost 10 p.m., so I call the Pattersons' cellphone to make sure they're not lost. "No, we're on the way. Do you need anything? Do you want us to stop for anything?" I am touched. And although I know my home is simply a way station while the Pattersons get settled, I hope they don't leave any time soon.