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Experiencing Hurricane Katrina

B. J. Fischer, Ph.D.

Latrice Fefie was already seated in the **mobile** classroom where I taught Introductory Sociology at Richland College in **Dallas**. On the **first** day I liked arriving **early** to the classroom so that I could chat with **students**, find out more about

them, their dreams, and their reasons for taking the course. The 18-year-old was supposed to be attending Dillard College, an all black, faith-based, liberal arts college in New Orleans. Having just purchased \$475.00 worth of books along with a new wardrobe, Latrice had declared herself a pre-engineering major with an acute interest in robotics.

But Hurricane Katrina changed all that.

For the past two months Latrice has been sharing a small apartment, just outside of Dallas, with her father and two brothers after having been shuffled between sports arenas, hotels and guest rooms. Her new life has been narrowed between attending class in a new city and taking care of her hurricane-dazed father who has decided to stay in Dallas and start a new life. When asked how she felt about being in a new place, she exclaimed, "It was really strange, almost like being out of my body. And I don't wake up to my little cousin singing and playing, anymore!"

Latrice lived just east of the Ninth Ward on Almonastar. It had been hit hard when the levee gave way and flooded her house up to the second floor. Luckily, she got out. Along with her father, two brothers, an aunt and uncle, she arrived at the Superdome Sunday afternoon. She stood in a long line for what seemed like forever. Everyone was hand checked by the Army National Guard. Backpacks, suitcases

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and grocery bags were opened and searched for any sharp objects, forks, knives, even can openers. Her eyebrow shaper was even confiscated. By the time she finally got inside, it was 7:00 p.m. She was safe.

Or so she thought.

Some things remained vivid in her mind. "I remember, first," she recounted in awe, "seeing all of these people, so many people. Just look at all of these people." She noted how the National Guard trucks never stopped bringing people to the Superdome. She remembered thinking that she had to get to the front of the line; otherwise, she would never get on the bus. I tried to imagine what it must have been like to be standing in line amidst so many tired, frizzled, and cranky people.

But as the hours dragged on, Latrice wondered if she would ever get out of that wretched place. At times, a large commotion signaled that buses might be arriving. But that proved to be mostly due to an extraordinary sense of anticipation people felt about getting rescued from a bad dream. The noise, body odors, crying babies, soldiers shouldering M-16's, and dim light began to wear away at her sense of normalcy.

The evacuation plan for this underserved population consisted of reserving a large shelter, the New Orleans Superdome, which could contain up to 50,000 people, as a temporary solution to ride out a hurricane. This facility was never intended to house people beyond several hours. Most certainly it was never constructed to contain people for days in hot, stifling weather. It could withstand hurricane force winds. It was considered by engineers one of the strongest structures in the city. But the breach of the 17th Street canal in Jefferson Parish allowed the waters of Lake Pontchartrain to come rushing in and flood most of the housing for this poor population. It turned the Superdome into what one witness called a "descent into pure hell."

Latrice remembered being startled awake by men yelling in loud voices: "She fell down, we need some help!" A woman had fallen to the floor and some men were seeking assistance. "I guess that they tried to take the woman to the medical center towards the rear of the Superdome," she recollected, "but they came back carrying her saying that the medical center was closed. It had closed at 9:00PM. "How can you close something like that at a time like this," asked Latrice, her voice quivering with anger. "So they had to carry the woman back to the line and they didn't even help her... she died right there and they didn't even lift a finger to carry her off to another place... they wanted her to lie right there...the soldiers."

Frustrations were rising because the toilets were filthy and overflowing, the air conditioning had broken down, and the generator-powered lights were low. People were worried about their children's safety. Rumors were flying about possible rapes or attacks.

But, "There was one woman," Latrice said, "who was just the most inspirational to me because she would ask questions of the authorities and then explain to us why they were doing what they were doing. I will never forget her because she was the smallest person that I have ever seen in my life, but she had the biggest voice possible." Latrice seemed awestruck as she related how "this woman would walk around and even though she was not with the medical center, if she saw somebody that needed some help, she would give it to them."

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Latrice finally was ushered on a bus with her father, who was delusional by this time. She didn't know whether he had become dehydrated or just shaken by standing so long. She was separated from her brothers whom she would meet later at the Dallas Convention Center. Asked about how she was feeling having been evacuated to Dallas, she replied, "I was angry, mad, sad, but kind of happy at the same time because New Orleans wasn't the ideal

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place to be even before the hurricane. There was a lot of corruption going on and something had to be done. If I was going to make it, I would have to put those feelings aside. And do what I have to do. Without an education, you can't do anything. I just can't let those emotions stop me from doing what I need to do."

Latrice recalled, as she gazed outside the safety of the bus, "looking back, there must have been double the people who were still waiting to get on the bus. And in my head, it looked like it never, ever moved!"

Imagine being an 18 year old, thrust out of a normal everyday existence, a sense of place, herded onto a bus, mostly strangers, and not really knowing where you are headed. Latrice said that she "got on the bus at 3:00 in the afternoon and didn't arrive until the next day. When we crossed over the border into Texas, they checked us again for weapons and any sharp objects. When we got to the Dallas Convention Center, I tried to compose myself and decide what to do next."

Trying to get her father to go to bed and sleep was her first priority. "I started to think about how to get in touch with my brothers and my aunt and uncle. Fortunately they, too, had made it to the Convention Center. Then we got on the Internet made available to us and managed to track my brothers down. They had been taken to Reunion Arena, but we knew then, that they were safe."

After being shuffled amongst the Convention Center, a church sanctuary, Reunion Arena, a hotel south of Dallas, another hotel in Farmer's Branch, a local minister found an apartment for them where they are currently staying.

During the time that Latrice was a sociology student in my class, I was struck by her sense of urgency about getting her story heard.

She desperately wanted people to know what had happened. To her dismay she would hear her fellow students say, "Why didn't we leave?" She explained to me that more than fifty percent of the people born in

New Orleans never live outside of the city. They live in extended and semi-extended families in the poorer districts. Parts of the city which are extremely vulnerable to hurricanes and flooding are home to most of them. These people can't just "up and leave" for higher ground. Their family is situated right there in the bowels of the city. Many don't even have personal transportation.

I asked her about what she thought sustained her throughout this bleak ordeal. "I prayed. I prayed a lot," she replied. You know this happened for a purpose... New Orleans needed to be rebuilt... there is no doubt about this... New Orleans needed to be rebuilt better and stronger... the levees were broke on purpose... if anyone looks at the breach you will see that it is broken, punched in... it didn't overflow. If it had overflowed, it would have been all of New Orleans that flooded. But they broke it there because they know that the houses down there are expendable. There is a rich area, nearby, called Eastover, where the stars live, and it didn't flood."

It would be easier to be in Dallas, according to Latrice, if she hadn't just started her freshman year in college. But Latrice's spirits brightened considerably by the end of the course. She announced proudly that she would be going back to Dillard College. "It's home. What can I say... it is home...I never say I am going back to New Orleans. I just say that I am going home."

Her father, on the other hand, plans to stay in Dallas and start a new life there.

During the final week, Latrice expressed to me how she had re-defined her future plans.

"Being in this sociology class really opened my eyes even more. I still want to do engineering and robotics, but I want to do construction in Africa now, after being part of this class. I want to design buildings in Africa...that would be so cool... it's important for one's career to be self-fulfilling... it would really make me feel that I have made a difference."

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