

Still feeling pain from Katrina, some evacuees struggle while others turn 'sorrow into song'

By Tonya Cone

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Many of the people who evacuated areas ravaged by Hurricane Katrina when it hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005 were drawn to Austin because their children had attended college here and they had fond memories of the city, explained F.A. Midlo, who left New Orleans 13 years ago with her husband, Maury.

In the wake of Katrina, Austin's Jewish community reached out to help those who fled to here from areas impacted by the storm. A Hurricane Relief Team, made up of organizations within the Jewish Community Association of Austin and area congregations, hosted events for New Orleans evacuees to get together, made facilities available to those here as a result of the storm, and collected and distributed clothing, money for prescriptions, rent and utility assistance, and other items to families in need.

Shelly Prant, executive director of the Jewish Community Center, said that about 40 Jewish families from storm-hit areas were in Austin, but the Hurricane Relief Team also reached out to others through area churches and by visiting those who stayed at the convention center, which acted as a relief center in the weeks after Katrina. To only help the Jewish evacuees, Prant said, would not provide enough assistance.

More than a year and a half after the storm, most major relief projects, such as those led by the JCAA, are no longer in the media spotlight and many families have returned to their homes or moved

elsewhere. F.A. Midlo said that many families, because of deep roots in New Orleans that go back many generations, chose to return there, even though what they returned to was much less than what they could have had if they stayed here.

"Those who stayed in New Orleans are disillusioned by the slow process that is being made and the politics, when there's an opportunity to change and improve things," Midlo said. "No one believes that New Orleans will be what it was."

As a result of challenges that continue to affect Gulf Coast areas affected by the storm, many people chose not to return to their homes there. Those who chose to stay in Austin, including those settling in the city's Jewish community, still feel its effects. Some view their experiences as struggles, while others see opportunities for growth, as they rebuild their lives here.

KURT AND JOYCE STEINER

At about 3:30 a.m. Sunday, Aug. 28, 2005, Joyce Steiner woke up her husband, telling him that if they did not leave their home in New Orleans, they would drown there.

After preparing their home, Joyce and Kurt Steiner left their home by car three hours later, en route to Austin, the home of their daughter and her family.

The retired couple arrived in Houston, the first place they found an available room since leaving New Orleans, 16 hours of bumper-to-bumper traffic later.

The next morning the Steiners arrived in Austin, where 12 evacuees, including her son and his family, stayed with her daughter, son-in-law and their four chil-



Joyce and Kurt Steiner
After Hurricane Katrina, the couple fled New Orleans. They've made a new home in Austin.

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dren. Evacuees were not allowed to return to New Orleans for a length of time, and they knew nothing about the state of their home and neighborhood beyond what they learned from watching television news.

"Our daughter said, 'If you don't want to live through more of these, you should move here,'" Joyce Steiner recalled.

Although the Steiners' home did not sustain damage beyond a broken window, the couple returned to New Orleans to sell their home, and moved to Austin permanently last June. Within two days of returning to Austin, they found and bought a new home, a sad step for the couple to take.

"We had been in New Orleans for 37 years in that house," she said. "This totally changed our lives."

The Steiners had been very involved in the city they were forced to leave. Kurt Steiner served as a city administrator in 1987, when Pope John Paul II visited New Orleans, and in 1988, when the Republican National Convention met there and nominated George H.W. Bush for president there.

The couple also was involved in the city's Jewish community. They were on the Collection Committee for the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans and were active members of their synagogue. Joyce Steiner taught preschool at the Federation for 17 years and was active in the National Council of Jewish Women, Greater New Orleans.

Hurricane Katrina splintered New Orleans' Jewish community, Joyce Steiner said.

"Our friends moved to where their children were; my doctor and dentist left. They left in droves," she said. "Several of the synagogues in New Orleans are having trouble surviving because membership is so low. The whole city is struggling, and the Jewish community reflects that."

Since moving to Austin, the Steiners have joined Congregation Agudas Achim, and Joyce Steiner plans to join Sisterhood. The couple also has gotten involved in cultural events, attending the symphony and musicals, dancing and going to jazz performances on Sunday afternoons at Cap City Comedy Club.

They live just more than a mile from their daughter's family and are very involved with their four grandchildren, who range from four to 16 years old, and have met some caring people here, such as someone who invited them out for dinner on New Year's Eve.

They are still settling into life here, however, and miss their four grandchildren who returned with their son to New Orleans.

"We miss the food and our friends," Kurt Steiner said. "We had a life we had built up. It's going to take some time to duplicate that."

Joyce Steiner added, "When we go to the symphony in New Orleans, we know half the people there. When we go here, we don't know many people, except young people who are friends of our daughter."

RAÚL, JODI, SELAH MAYA AND GABRIEL LIEB ZIGHELBOIM

When the Zigelboim family left New Orleans on Saturday, Aug. 27, 2005, they thought they would stay



Raúl, Jodi, Selah Maya and Gabriel Lieb Zigelboim

Their home damaged by the hurricane, the family first went to Houston and then moved to Austin. But the transition to life here has been rough.

"When you have a loss, there's no way to determine how long it'll take to get over it or how it affects different people."

— Jodi Zigelboim

The family's home after Katrina, and Gabriel and Selah Maya in New Orleans at Mardi Gras in 2006.



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at their grandmother's home in Houston for a few days while Hurricane Katrina blew over. Packing accordingly, they took along a suitcase with three days worth of clothes.

On Monday, the day the storm hit New Orleans the hardest, the family realized they would be in Texas longer than expected. So, they began looking for schools in which to enroll Selah Maya, who is now 12 years old and in sixth grade, and Gabriel, who is now 10 and in fourth grade.

The Zigelboims also began killing time by visiting Houston's museums, which offered free admission to those with a New Orleans driver's license, and eating lots of ice cream.

After a few weeks, when sharing one bedroom at their grandmother's house began to wear on the family's nerves, the Zigelboims also began looking for an apartment in a city where rents and occupancy were through the roof.

Raúl Zigelboim had lost his job with a small technology company immediately and did not want to return to New Orleans; he did not foresee a job opportunities in his field there.

The family's home, located on the lake-side of Tulane University, had been submerged under eight to 10 feet of water and was destroyed. By the time the university reopened in January 2006, the family had decided against returning to New Orleans.

When the school reopened, however, Jodi Zigelboim began commuting between Houston and New Orleans to her job as director of nutrition at Tulane's School of Public Health, which she continued to do through last September.

Not wanting to settle permanently in Houston, the Zigelboims began considering a move to another city, perhaps Portland, Ore., Cleveland, Ohio, or Pittsburgh, Pa.

They had been active in the Jewish community in New Orleans and wanted to find another city with a small Jewish population and a Jewish school the children could attend. They also looked for a place with a technology industry in which Raúl Zigelboim could find a job. The family picked Austin.

They bought a home near the Dell Jewish Community Campus and, in August, moved to Austin. After moving here, the family bought new furnishings for their home, Selah Maya and Gabriel began attending school at the Austin Jewish Academy, the family joined Congregation Kol Halev and Raúl Zigelboim began work-

Alvin and Madilyn Samuels

Their home flooded by the storm, the couple moved to Austin. So did their son and his children, who since have gone back to New Orleans. The Samuels, however, stayed and embraced the community.

"The opportunities possible here in Austin are such that they allow me to turn sorrow into song. People are welcoming, and there is as much potential here as there is in any Jewish community in the country. We have the opportunity to have our voices heard."

— Alvin Samuels



ing at a small technology firm.

The Zigelboims also have gotten to know some other families through the Academy and Kol Halev.

The Zigelboims' transition to life in Austin, however, has not been smooth. Jodi Zigelboim said the family was unprepared for a higher cost of living in Austin. They thought the only difference would be in the cost of real estate, but since moving here have found the cost of everything higher than it was in New Orleans. Also, Selah Maya and Gabriel no longer attend the Academy due to what the family saw as a lack of direction at the school. Raúl lost his job when his employer declared bankruptcy in mid-March. Also, the family has experienced difficulty finding after-school activities for Selah Maya and Gabriel.

"When you have a loss, there's no way to determine how long it'll take to get over it or how it affects different people," Jodi Zigelboim said. "There's a lot of loss, different changes and stages. One of the things that's hard when you're in a new community where the people in school haven't experienced the loss is that they don't understand. It's hard to for them to keep reaching out to other people, and I don't think they always understand how much the children really need."

Her family appreciates the many friends and families who have reached out to them, she said, and hopes that with new leadership at the Academy there will be positive change so that Selah Maya and Gabriel can eventually feel comfortable returning to the school.

Since Raúl Zigelboim lost his job, the family does not know if they will stay in Austin. But he is tired of moving and does not want to leave again, and he and his wife have begun to feel like they are part of the community.

"The transition hasn't been easy," Jodi Zigelboim said. "People think we should just get over it and start over again. But it's hard. It takes a really long time to organize things like doctors and getting things together."

"We miss everything about New Orleans — our life and our friends there."

ALVIN AND MADILYN SAMUELS

In the years after moving to New Orleans in 1967, Alvin and Madilyn Samuels stayed in their home to ride out hurricanes and other storms. When Hurricane Katrina was headed toward the Gulf Coast in August 2005, however, the couple knew it was different. They packed their bags, headed to Memphis, Tenn., and then continued on to St. Louis for their nephew's wedding the next weekend.

"It was the most frightening looking storm I'd ever seen," said Alvin Samuels, who many years ago worked as an offshore drilling engineer.

Madilyn Samuels added, "We knew it was the one we had to leave for."

The couple made the right decision. Their home and that of their son, Mark Samuels, and his three children were flooded in the storm.

Knowing they could not return to New Orleans, they began considering other cities that could become their new home.

Two of their three sons had attended the University of Texas at Austin, and the couple remembered the city fondly. They also were drawn to the Dell Jewish Community Campus, especially the Austin Jewish Academy. Along with their son and his family, they came to Austin.

Alvin and Madilyn Samuels bought a home near "The J" in which they could live on the ground floor and their son and his children on the second floor. Once the family moved in, Mark Samuels began commuting to New Orleans to run his business, Basin Street Records, while Alvin and Madilyn Samuels took care of their grandchildren in Austin.

The two youngest children, Naomi and Eric, immediately enrolled in the Academy, a school for kindergarten through eighth grade, and Geoffrey in Anderson High School. Alvin and Madilyn Samuels wanted their transition to be as smooth as possible. The children had attended the New Orleans Jewish Day School in Memory of Patti Arnold Samuels, named for their late mother, and their grandparents said the children who attended the Academy had an easier time there than their older brother did in public high school.

"The two youngest, who attended the AJA had a fantastic year there. They were the nicest group of kids I'd ever met," Alvin Samuels said, adding that the children's friends often visited their home.

Mark Samuels and his family have since returned to New Orleans, but Madilyn Samuels said her granddaughter returns to Austin frequently to visit the friends she made at the Academy.

Since moving to Austin, Alvin and Madilyn Samuels have embraced the city and become involved in the Jewish community. They joined Congregation Agudas Achim, she is enrolled in the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School and the couple attends and teaches JCAA classes. Also, in an effort to give back to the school that welcomed his grandchildren, he serves on the board of the Academy, which he says has the potential to be the best Jewish day school in the South.

"The opportunities possible here in Austin are such that they allow me to turn sorrow into song," Alvin Samuels said. "People are welcoming, and there is as much potential here as there is in any Jewish community in the country. We have the opportunity to have our voices heard."

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