



BBC NEWS

After Katrina: Readers' experiences

One year on from Hurricane Katrina, BBC News website readers describe how they and their families were affected by the disaster and how their lives have changed since.

DARRYL BARTHE, NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

I left for Little Rock, Arkansas with my girlfriend and my family the day before Katrina hit. We all stayed in a hotel room for days, watching the terrible storm and flooding in New Orleans. We were all relieved we had left but were pretty angry watching the television pictures as it became obvious that most of the devastation was due to the manmade error of the levee breaches. It was all really surreal watching it. I came back to Louisiana in the last week of September and stayed with my mother in the suburb of La Place.

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I returned to New Orleans the first week of October - which was the first time most residents were allowed back in - to find my apartment in the Farber St John area totally destroyed. It had also been looted. Whatever had not been destroyed by the six or seven feet of water had been looted, including my computer, which I had put a lot of money into. It was really surreal around the neighbourhood. It was totally quiet at night. I saw one guy just walk up to a car and smash the windscreen. I asked a police officer what I should do to protect myself and he told me to arm myself and not be afraid to shoot someone. The house I grew up in, in the Lower Ninth Ward area, was also completely destroyed. It was a scene of complete devastation. Every time you turned a corner, it was another "oh my God" moment. There were houses that had been picked up off their foundations and others that had trees straight through them.

I received the standard \$3,200 from Fema to get myself back on my feet and I moved in with my girlfriend uptown. My family has lived in New Orleans since 1784. We are all artisans, plasterers and carpenters and we have been putting our skills to good use helping to fix houses in some of the worst-hit areas. I am schoolteacher and have since returned to my job. I have also bought a house uptown. As for now, the city is recovering, albeit very slowly, but still everywhere you look there are signs of devastation. If you go to some areas, such as the French Quarter, it is as if nothing happened. But if you go to some of the worst affected areas, they are still devastated. There are people out there every day trying to rebuild their homes and their lives. But it really has been left up to the individuals and it has been really slow going. As we are now well into hurricane season, there is a tension and anxiety in the city now that is very uncharacteristic of "the city that



care forgot". The levees need to be strengthened even further and we just hope that they will not be breached again. New Orleans is a very Catholic city and it seems our patron these days is Saint Jude (patron of hopeless causes).

VIRGINIA SIMONS, LAKE CHARLES/SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA

My Aunt, Virginia Ruth Aitkens James, my mom's younger sister, drowned in her attic during Katrina. She was an 83-year-old widow with no children and refused to leave, probably because she didn't want to leave her cat, but also perhaps because she had never done so during previous hurricanes and didn't believe her house, which was on high ground near the Mississippi River, was at risk. The 20-foot surge that came up the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet - an obsolete shipping channel that should have been closed years ago - flooded her house and also pushed the oil storage tanks at the nearby Murphy Oil Refinery off their slabs, causing a massive oil spill.

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Her body was retrieved by the National Guard on 16 September, but it was not until May 2006 that we could get the body released from the Fema morgue. My mom had to endure DNA tests and endless hassle with Fema, all after her own house was almost destroyed by Hurricane Rita, which came after Katrina. When I visited my Aunt Virginia's house last November, there was still about two feet of oily wet muck inside the house. Mould and flies were everywhere. Outside, there was a dried layer of charcoal-like stuff that had cracked into kind of a cobblestone pattern. There was a boat on the roof of a neighbouring house and there was not one living plant anywhere to be seen. On the front of the house the National Guard had sprayed in orange paint "one dead in attic". We finally had a funeral on 27 May of this year and placed Aunt Virginia's ashes in the tomb with her parents.

My mom had to move into a Fema trailer herself after Rita. She has only just moved back into her repaired house in Lake Charles, Louisiana this month. My brother's house was also destroyed, and he has been living in his garage. The demand for contractors and labour is such that his house will not be repaired until early 2007. I just visited my mom to mark Katrina's anniversary. A year later, little progress is to be seen in the New Orleans area. I had planned to retire and move closer to New Orleans, but the crime resurgence and lack of political will for change has forced me to change my mind.