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First Hand Account: Xavier University of Louisiana, St. Katherine Drexel Hall

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On Saturday, August 28, 2005, I experienced a traumatic event that aided my transition from adolescent to adult. Three weeks ago I was lying in my bed at Xavier University of Louisiana around ten o'clock in the morning, when our resident advisor knocked on my door. She told my roommate and I to get dressed as fast as we could because our residence hall, St. Katherine Drexel, would be having a mandatory meeting in five minutes. Even in an emergency, pajamas were never to be worn in the lobby. After our resident advisor went downstairs, the girls on my floor gathered near the elevator to discuss what the emergency meeting could possibly be about. No one expected the issue to be anything other than girls missing curfew after the Greek party that took place the night before. This was an issue that did not seem urgent enough for anyone to rush so everyone causally showered, got dressed, and assembled in the lobby to hear the bad news.

As girls filled the lobby, the mood of the room became more and more eager to find out what we were all in trouble for. Everyone was impatient for the meeting to begin, when the Director of St. Katherine Drexel hall and the Director of Housing and Residence Life for the university entered the lobby, both holding documents. The Director of Housing and Residence Life rarely comes to talk to the residents, so all of the youthful chatter came to an end at the sight of them. Mrs. White, the director of St. Katherine Drexel hall, informed us that the state of Louisiana had been declared under watch for Hurricane Katrina and that we were to evacuate "only if our parents felt the need for us to go." She told us that all the administrators and faculty of the university would be having a meeting at two o'clock that afternoon in order to determine whether or not the university would issue a mandatory evacuation. "In the mean time," she advised, "we should return to our rooms and pack a weekend bag just in case your parents want you to leave or Xavier evacuates."

I returned to our room, stunned at the news, especially because I thought I was going to hear a lecture on curfew and how to always conduct ourselves as "Xavierites." I called my parents to tell them about the university meeting and the news I had just received, only to find that my parents saw no necessity in my leaving campus to return home nor did they think that the hurricane would reach New Orleans. Without having a chance to mentally digest the problem at hand, my phone began to excessively ring. My friends, who stayed in different residence halls, called to see if we were told the same information in our meeting and what my plans were. I told them I would meet them outside so we all could figure out what we were going to do. The majority of my friends, including myself, were out of state freshman with no on-campus transportation, so without the funds to buy plane tickets home the day we needed to travel, we were trapped.

Once my friends and I accepted the fact that we had no means to leave campus, we tried to mentally prepare ourselves for what was about to come and ways to survive. After the university meeting, Xavier University administrators, including our president Norman C. Francis issued a mandatory evacuation of the university. Dr. Francis also issued an order for all those who would be staying on campus during the duration of Hurricane Katrina to report to their respective residence halls so there would an account of their presence. As a result, at two-thirty that

afternoon my friend Brittany Domineck and I, who begged her resident advisor for permission to stay in my hall, packed weekend bags assuming that Xavier University would evacuate us to another campus. Soon after roll was taken of all the residents unable to return home, it became apparent that Xavier University had no intentions of evacuating us to another university for safety, but instead would use the university to house us throughout the entire event.

I called home to alert my parents of the news Dr. Francis' released and told them my assumption of our evacuation to another university would not be carried out. As I talked to my parents and my brother on the phone about the urgency of the situation and Xavier University inability to respond accordingly, tears began to roll down my face and images of my funeral entered my mind. My mother ensured me that God would not put me in any situation I could not handle and that everything in life happened for a reason. This was her way of assuring me, and herself, that I would live through this. She also told me that New Orleans was in the eye of the storm so that although it was a clear sunny day there at the time when the hurricane hit, the winds would be intense so I should pull my mattress out into the hallway so that my head was not near any windows.

I ran upstairs to tell my friend Brittany what my mother told us to do in preparation for the storm, when I found her laying on my roommate's bed crying intensively and shaking. Brittany was on the phone with her family and instead of giving my advice and words of encouragement to calm her spirit, they were making her frantic. When she hung up the phone, I tried to calm her down but our position had finally sunk in and I had now become hysterical. We both sat down and prayed for our lives and the preservation of our university. That night I told all the girls on my floor to pull their mattresses into the hallway so no one would be lying near any windows and to charge their cell phones because we would probably lose power and there was no assurance of how soon we would be able to return home.

Hurricane Katrina hit Xavier University at one thirty-seven in the morning on Sunday, August 29, 2005, destroying the university's beautiful historic campus and any hope we may have had that New Orleans would not be greatly affected. I awoke on Sunday morning to find that the power generators had come on, meaning the electricity was out, and our hallway was filled with females who came up to the fifth floor for fear of flooding. Later on that day, the freshman males from St. Michael's hall were told to pack a light bag and walk over to our residence hall because their three-story residence hall's ceiling suffered damage. The men were told to stay in the study lounges on the sixth floor, but some felt that this would be their only opportunity to mingle with females, being that Xavier University was a Catholic school. So they decided to run down to the fifth floor as a group, while we were showering, and got caught.

Needless to say, the boys of St. Michael's residence hall were escorted back over to their dorm that night with barely any food to survive off of. The next few days seemed to take forever with no hot food, no running water, or suction for the commodes. Our survival of the hurricane was nothing compared with surviving everyday life for the next few days in St. Katherine Drexel hall. Our situation did not seem as depressing during the day, using daylight to function; but when night fall hit, the reality of being personally involved in a natural disaster became too much for me to handle. I tried to not to panic for the sake of my friends who seemed to be using my humor for comfort. But after the third day of living without taking a shower, being able to flush

the commodes, having to eat rations with the odor of feces in the air became overwhelming.

By Wednesday, August 31, 2005, everyone in our residence had given up on the possibility of our rescue considering that many people were not aware Xavier University had not evacuated us to another location or that our power generators were only in service one day. Being that my older brother worked for ABC World News, he kept me updated through text messaging on the rate at which city officials were evacuating victims. He told me, and I later reported to everyone living in our hall, that the official of the Federal Emergency Management Agency was aware of the amount of students trapped on Xavier's campus, but in comparison to the elderly, sick, and homeless, our condition had been declared stable enough to keep us safe even if we were not helped for another month. The thought of living the way that were, once everyone heard the news of rescue, devastated my peers psychologically causing their rational thinking skills to deteriorate.

That night, hostility arose between my peers and the elders that were chaperoning us and monitoring the amount of food we consumed. The girls of my hall came to a general consensus that the adults were serving us smaller portions of food than they were receiving themselves. Unable to reason properly due to being malnourished, my peers continued to devise a plan to raid the stash of food and turn to violence upon any signs of resistance from the adults. By the grace of God, I was able to convince the ring leader of how current situation and how, at this point, we were unable to predict how long we would have to survive off of the food. While I was convincing her to acquiesce, a fight broke out in the next room between two girls on a petty issue. Once the two girls were separated from each other, everyone returned to their rooms. Although the entire residence hall was pitch black where flashlights were our only source of illumination, it was only around nine o'clock at night.

I returned to my room to find my friend Brittany curled up on my roommate's bed crying, which would not have alarmed me because sobbing had become apart of her daily routine, but this night I noticed she was on the phone. Since the hurricane, cell phone networks were busy and no one wanted turn on their phones because there was no way to recharge them without electricity. Thus, with the exception of a few people whose phones had service, no one in our hall had been able to get in contact with their families. I sat down next to Brittany in an effort to use the same reception she was using and turned on my phone. Everyone from church members to old classmates had called and left messages or sent text messages. To hear the fear in the voices of mentors and relatives who never seem to be shaken up by anything brought me to tears. Up until this point, I had not expressed any appropriate emotions so this sudden outburst was not welcome.

I broke down in tears and cried for what seemed like hours, but without electricity I cannot really tell, until I fell asleep. The next morning, Thursday, September 1, 2005, I woke up to someone pounding on our door telling us to "pack whatever we can carry" and hurry downstairs to the boat. I looked at Brittany, who was still half asleep, to see if I was dreaming. Ironically this was the way we had been alerted of the tragedy so it did not seem real that this was the way we would being alerted of our rescue. My friend and I packed toiletries in preparation of our first bath and our most valuable items ---one pair of jeans, three shirts, matching purses and shoes. I put on my rain boots, because our first floor was completely flooded and the water contained all

types of unimaginable bacteria. I struggled to carry the only belongings I would have for a long time down four flights of stairs.

The boat took us to the top of a bridge on the interstate, where we were surrounded with three hundred or so Xavier students and faculty. This was our first time seeing how many "Xavierites" had been trapped in their residence halls. As we proceeded to walk over the bridge we were joined by natives of New Orleans, as well as convicts, and people in serious need of hospitalization. Although it had not rained since the hurricane, as we sat on the bridge waiting to be "rescued" it rained for three hours. We sat on the bridge for thirteen hours. Eventually, the United States Army and Coast Guard evacuated Xavier University students only about a mile away to another section of the interstate where we boarded charter and school buses. We were transported to either Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana or Grambling State University in Grambling, Louisiana because these two schools were located near airports.

Once I arrived in Grambling, Louisiana, at two o'clock in the morning the next day, my eyes stung from lack of exposure to light. Grambling University provided us with hot food, fresh towels and washcloths, toiletries, clothes, and southern hospitality. All of which may seem minute, but after surviving something so tragic, simple comforts were greatly appreciated. My family arranged for me to stay in a hotel that night, with the thought that I had suffered enough and should not have to sleep on a cot two inches off of the ground. I flew home to Atlanta, Georgia the next morning with a different perspective on life.

Upon my arrival, little things like smiling faces, smells of anything but urine and decay, and electricity seemed foreign to me. The Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson airport has always been busy, but after having to keep close surveillance of my only possessions on a bridge for thirteen hours for protection from people who have nothing to live for, strangers made me very agitated and jumpy. It took days before I stop having nightmares that were so vivid I could still smell the feces and decaying bodies in the air; but after I recuperated physically and psychologically, I realize how materialistic and immature I was before this event. This event has caused me to empathize more with people I would not have paid any attention to prior. It has also helped me to reexamine my morals, aspirations, and fears. Things that may have stressed me out before, no longer strike me as a challenge, and the outlook my peers have on issues now makes me concerned about the future of our nation. After experiencing Hurricane Katrina, I value each day I have access to simple luxuries and will continue to appreciate them with or without experiencing another natural disaster this lifetime.