



Photos courtesy of Calvin Mackie '90

After the Storm

By Chandra R. Thomas

On Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina tore through the Gulf Coast, ripping a path of destruction in her wake. Meteorologists initially confirmed that New Orleans had narrowly missed the brunt of the storm. Then the levees, which were supposed to protect the bowl-shaped city that is surrounded by water on three sides, broke, inundating the city with several feet of water and washing away thousands of lives, property and memories in what is being called the worst natural disaster in American history.

Six Morehouse alumni share their stories of survival, resourcefulness, relocation, birth and death as they face life after the storm.

'I wouldn't leave him alone'

Jamal Caliste '98

AS THE NATION WATCHED in horror the TV images of New Orleans residents being plucked from murky water and rooftops, Jamal Caliste '98 was living out the nightmare. He and his father, Fred, spent three days on the roof of their Gentilly home before being rescued by a Coast Guard chopper. Caliste had planned to evacuate before the storm, but his father, a 71-year-old heart patient who had endured the brutal aftermath of Hurricane Betsy as a child, refused to leave.

"I wouldn't leave him alone, so I stayed," says Caliste. First, high wind and heavy rain knocked out electricity. But Caliste did not realize the magnitude of the impending danger until he was awakened by the sound

of a rock crashing through their kitchen window. Within hours, water began seeping into the low-lying den area of their house and gradually rose to Caliste's waist.

"We started grabbing stuff, mostly my mother's—[who happened to be out of town for the weekend]—and trying to get it into the attic."

All the while Caliste repeatedly called 9-1-1 for help. "They promised to send rescuers, but they never came," he says. Rescue choppers had begun dotting the sky like mosquitoes, but Caliste knew he would have to figure out a way to get their attention. He climbed onto the roof through the same window that had been cracked earlier. Eventually, neighbors passing by in a boat helped him hoist his father into the attic. For days, Caliste alternated between the roof and the attic, always sure to shine a lantern at night. "The choppers would hover above the house, shine their light on me, and—I want to say they saw that I was black—and they would go the other way," he says.

Father and son toughed it out on the roof with only a jug of water, vanilla wafers and a few sandwiches until the proverbial cavalry finally arrived on Aug. 31, which happened to be Caliste's birthday. His dad had gotten so dehydrated that he had begun to hallucinate.

"When the chopper came, this guy wearing camouflage came down a rope like G.I. Joe and told us to come quickly." The rescuer would not allow them to take any personal items, so they were forced to leave behind everything—their identification, wallets, cell phones and even medicine.

From there they were dropped off on an interstate and left to fight

their way through a throng of about 1,000 frustrated evacuees, all trying to edge their way onto buses headed to a temporary shelter. Caliste's father had to be treated at a makeshift medical tent after he fainted from severe dehydration and the blistering heat. They eventually made it to the Houston Astrodome where Caliste was able to reach his mother, Cynthia, by telephone.

Caliste and his parents have settled into a suburban Houston apartment where they plan to remain indefinitely. Caliste, who had worked as an elementary school music teacher, is now in a management training program for a local retail chain. Along with assistance from FEMA and the American Red Cross, Caliste says he was grateful to receive monetary donations from some of his old Morehouse friends like Khari Simmons.

As for what he's learned in his Katrina experience, Caliste is very blunt: "I learned that when they tell you to get out of town because a hurricane is headed for the city, you probably should listen!"

Pictures, memories, everything – erased just like that'

Vance Vaucresson '92

IT WAS DIFFICULT ENOUGH LOSING his childhood home and the new home that he and his family were just weeks away from moving into. But Katrina also claimed another casualty that was close to Vance Vaucresson's heart: his family's business that had been in operation since 1899. The New Orleans native had headed Vaucresson's Sausage Company ever since his father, Robert "Sonny" Vaucresson, died in 1998.

Shortly after news of Katrina's impending arrival spread, Vaucresson, a 1992 graduate, and his wife, Julie—then six months pregnant—packed up their son Kyce, 5, his mother and mother-in-law and pointed their massive, seven-seat Chevy Trailblazer in the direction of the nearby town of New Iberia, La. The trip, which normally takes two hours, lasted nine, and their arrival at a house already jam-packed with 12 other family members was far from ideal.

"My wife and I and my little boy had to share the same room with all of our stuff," he recalls. "She was pregnant and uncomfortable, it was horrible."

Two weeks after the storm, Vaucresson and his brother-in-law went back to the city to survey the damage. The home that he and his wife were rebuilding after a fire had destroyed it the year before was ruined, and his mother's Lake Vista home had been under eight feet of water for two weeks. "I saw all of my family history – pictures, memories, everything – erased just like that. It was an overwhelming feeling, and I started crying. This was the house I had grown up in. Why did it have to go like this?"

The family's business didn't fare much better. It had been waterlogged, destroying equipment, fixtures, refrigeration units, delivery trucks – everything. Computer problems left him unable to access any money, and the cramped living conditions were tough. A friend in Washington, D.C., raised \$15,000 for the family, and Vaucresson's former Morehouse Glee Club Director David Marrow also stepped in to help. "He got me another copy of my diploma and copies of my transcripts. They came so fast in the mail it made my head spin," he says.

The Vaucressons welcomed a healthy baby girl, Hilary, in December. The family now lives in a three-bedroom mobile home in New Iberia; Vaucresson hopes they can rebuild one day. But right now, he is scrambling to get the family business running again. He has closed a deal to process the family's famous spicy sausages at another New Orleans area meat company.

"It was an extremely humbling experience," he says. "We, as a people, learned humanity in its truest form."

'Big difference between poor and rich'

Cedric Richmond '95

AS A LOUISIANA STATE REPRESENTATIVE and chair of the Louisiana Black Caucus, Cedric Richmond '95 pledged to work hard as a

public servant. His dedication was put to the test when Katrina struck. After an alarming conference call with the governor and other state leaders a few days before the storm hit, Richmond knew that it would be the "big one" that had always been predicted for his hometown. "I could tell by the sound in their voices that this was *the one*," says Richmond, a personal injury attorney.

He immediately got to work, packing important papers and raising valuables to higher ground at his Eastern New Orleans home and at the home of his relatives. Then he made the rounds at nightclubs and social gatherings, warning residents to leave the city immediately. The next morning, he and his Western Terrier, Tito, headed by car to the Atlanta home of his former Morehouse roommate, Devetus Jones. As television images of Katrina and subsequent flooding splashed across the television screen, Richmond knew he had to get to work. The long ride to the Office of Emergency Preparedness Center in Baton Rouge, La., was full of challenges. Power outages forced him to drive in total darkness and gas shortages nearly left him stranded. However, that paled in comparison to the compelling sights along the way, including some homes literally blown into the street. "The worst part was seeing people and children stranded on bridges in 100-degree weather with no help in sight."

Richmond worked side by side with fellow Caucus members for nearly two weeks, coordinating supplies, housing and rescue efforts. "It was a lot of long hours, but you didn't think about it because there was so much to do," he says.

Two weeks later, Richmond returned to New Orleans and visited his home that had been buried under water. He says his network of Morehouse brothers leaned on each other during the ordeal for emotional support and the exchange of critical information. Although he now splits his time between homes in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, he hopes to rebuild in New Orleans. Katrina, he says, reinforced in him the importance of family, but he also feels the nation learned a lot.

"I think Katrina showed how the government fails to care for the poor and highlighted the big difference between poor and rich in this country," he says. "New Orleans is a mess, but I think it will be back . . . one day."

'I knew this sucker was going to be the big one!'

Calvin Mackie '90

KATRINA TOOK A TOLL on the lives of her many victims, but none greater than those who lost loved ones in the mayhem that ensued. It's a reality that is all too true for Calvin Mackie '90. Months after the storm, the Tulane University professor and motivational speaker lost his father and stepmother just days apart. Their deaths, which he feels was largely the result of declining health and stress from Katrina, are just one chapter in the melodrama that ensued after he, his wife, Tracy, and sons Myles and Mason evacuated to Natchez, Miss.

"I'm a mechanical engineer," he notes, matter-of-factly. "I say that to say that is why I packed everything — my tailored suits, pictures, important files, the CPU to the computer, the kids' stuff. I knew this sucker was going to be the big one!" Mackie also had the forethought to withdraw \$5,000 in cash (some of which he distributed to family members) before leaving town.

As the news of Katrina's devastation spread, Mackie began to panic. For a week he was unable to reach his father, who just before Katrina hit had been diagnosed with lung cancer. The Mackies stayed put in Mississippi until November, when they returned to New Orleans full time. Mackie immediately busied himself trying to set up his father's critical medical treatment that had been delayed in the chaos following the storm.

His stepmother died March 22.

His dad passed away just six days later.

"I think it was all just too much for them," he says. "It was a lot to deal with."

Mackie has since been appointed to the Louisiana Recovery Authority, the agency created to lead the state's rebuilding efforts. The authority will focus on key state issues such as housing, jobs, transportation, health care and education. Mackie also is featured in "When the Levees Broke," a documentary by another Morehouse alumnus, Spike Lee '79.

As the rebuilding efforts continue, Mackie says it is important for the leaders involved to focus on the most important issues. "This is not a question of whether or not to rebuild, this is about what we as a country are going to do for all these homeowners and taxpaying citizens who lost so much. It's what they deserve."

"I'll never forget seeing people driving up in Hummers and Escalades standing in the food line at the church," he says. "You could tell they never thought this could be them."

'They had nothing'

Maurice Baudy '95

THE SAYING GOES THAT HOME IS where the heart is. Thanks to Katrina, the saying is much more than a cliché for Maurice Baudy. Although he and his wife, Devanaha, both New Orleans natives, had lived in metro Atlanta for several years, most of their family still lived in the Crescent City. Luckily, his parents and grandparents had evacuated to relatives' homes in Baton Rouge.

"That Monday morning I watched from my desk at work satellite images on the Internet of the hurricane pummeling my city," remembers Baudy, a strategic sourcing analyst for The Home Depot. "I was in disbelief," he says. "I was literally watching it and crying at my desk." Baudy and his wife immediately jumped into action, sending out frantic e-mails appealing to friends for assistance. "I felt that was my role — to get my family back to some level of normalcy as soon as possible," he says. "They had no clothes, no hygiene products, nothing, things we take for granted — like a comb or a brush"

Baudy's plea was answered by many — including several of his fellow Morehouse buddies — who sent boxes of clothes, gift cards and money. "We were receiving boxes of stuff from everywhere — St. Louis, Texas, Ohio — for months."

His parents' home in eastern New Orleans was destroyed along with his grandmother's home in the Pontchartrain Park area. He also was moved by the firsthand accounts of those who were caught in the storm — like his parents' neighbor who watched his wife drown.

Baudy's parents and grandparents have decided to remain in Baton Rouge for now. As for Baudy, he says he learned a lot from the ordeal. "It taught me a lot about the character of a lot of people. It also made me really see how many lives I've come in contact with in my life."

'It has taught us all the value of patience'

Ike Spears '83

IKE SPEARS NEVER DREAMED that he would live in Boston, but that is where he and his family ended up after Hurricane Katrina. Spears, who was born and raised in New Orleans, his wife, Sonja, and sons, Diallo and Omari, initially rode out the storm in a Houston hotel. After nearly a week of taking in the devastating news about their city, the Speares decided that it was time to head to his wife's hometown. Soon they had an apartment, and the kids were enrolled in school.

"Let's just say my wife and kids adjusted much better than I did," says Spears of his experience in Beantown. He and his wife also were faced with the challenges of juggling their careers and family between both cities. Spears, an attorney, and his wife, a judge, took turns returning to New Orleans for business, always sure that one of them remained in town with the children.

Spears says he continues to connect with his Morehouse College family since the storm. "We have created a collective network, passing on information about FEMA, Red Cross, housing and insurance companies to each other." Despite the many challenges of living in post-Katrina New Orleans, the Spears have decided to return and rebuild their Uptown home that, during the storm, steeped in nearly four feet of water.

"I think we have a problem with leadership in the city right now that has made it hard for a lot of people to return. But, in the end, I think it has taught us all the value of patience." ■

When the Levees Broke

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH SPIKE LEE '79

By Deon Embry, senior music major



After the screening of "When the Levees Broke," Spike Lee '79 addressed the freshman class during Spirit Night.

Filmmaker Shelton "Spike" Lee '79 tells of the heartbreaking, personal stories of those who endured the harrowing ordeal of Hurricane Katrina in the HBO documentary "When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts."

Lee and HBO screened the documentary at Morehouse in August. Before the screening, Lee gave an exclusive interview to the Morehouse student newspaper, *The Maroon Tiger*. Following are excerpts from that interview.

DE: When did you realize you had to do some type of work regarding the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina?

Lee: [Last year], I was in Venice at the Venice film festival and Tanya my wife called me and said, "Turn on the TV." I saw all these horrific images and like everyone else I wondered, "Where was the government?" Right then and there I decided that I would like to do a documentary on Katrina. I felt it would be a pivotal moment in American history.

DE: Upon arrival [in New Orleans], what were you expecting from the city and its condition, and were you mentally prepared?

Lee: I was mentally prepared, but even with that mental preparation ... I saw the newspapers, magazines, and television, but to see it with my naked eye — the devastation, it was ... I mean just the scale, to see it 3D is something that television cannot begin to show. It was crazy!

DE: What was the most devastating thing about New Orleans?

Lee: The people, because I'm a person always to put life above property and just to see the effect that it had on the people that are still there.

DE: How important was it to actually get people from New Orleans, especially musicians such as Wynton Marsellis, Terrance Blanchard, etc.?

Lee: New Orleans is a cultural mecca, the birthplace of jazz, so it's very important to have these excellent musicians who are from New Orleans be a part of this film.

DE: Why HBO instead of a NBC or ABC? Some viewers don't have the luxury of the premium cable channels.

Lee: I have working relations with HBO, which produced my other documentaries. There is no way in the world [network] stations would have given me four hours of time. I did not want to have Kim Polk talking about how her five-year-old daughter drowned and then here's a commercial for deodorant — it doesn't work like that.

DE: What do you feel Morehouse has contributed to you that allows you to keep being innovative and coming up with different ways to portray life?

Lee: Morehouse provided the foundation for me. I am a third-generation Morehouse man. My father, my grandfather and my mother's grandmother went to Spelman, so it's natural.