

South Bay turns from refuge to home for evacuees

Hurricane Katrina's victims are finding jobs, buying homes and settling down here.

By Alison Hewitt
Copley News Service

Mark Morris' one-bedroom Gardena apartment isn't as big as the place he had in New Orleans, and it's much more sparsely decorated.

But after a roller-coaster year that began when everything he owned was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, it's home. And Morris considers himself blessed.

"I left New Orleans with a backpack, and I haven't been back," said Morris, 45, a tall man with a laid-back demeanor. "And part of my life is still there ... (but) I don't have any intention of going back.

"It just won't be the same. It wore me out. I can't go through that anymore."

Morris is one of about 5,000 individuals and families who fled to Los Angeles County from Hurricane Katrina last year and are still living here. Some hope to eventually return to the Gulf Coast to rebuild their homes and their lives. But many others -- for reasons as diverse as the spices in a gumbo pot -- have decided to settle in Southern California permanently.

Most gravitated to this area after the disaster because they had friends or family members who could help them, or because they had lived in the Los Angeles region before, said Vickie Mays, a professor of psychology at UCLA who is leading a national effort to help make mental health care available to hurricane victims.

Other evacuees came because they were offered aid by local charities, she noted, and some evacuees have said they were enticed by the prospect of balmy weather and maybe a little by Los Angeles' reputation for glamour.

Nevertheless, for all of them, resettling has been fraught with adjustments and difficulties. The disaster wreaked mental as well as physical havoc, and many hurricane victims have found they need psychological counseling as well as financial aid.

"A lot of them had legal hang-ups, like no identification," said Red Cross spokesman Nick Samaniego. Many didn't yet know whether they would get any help from insurance money, he added.

Officials from other charities that have aided Katrina evacuees also point out that many of the newcomers needed to be retrained and tested to get California licenses for jobs they had done in Louisiana.

Morris, a teacher, bounced around from shelters to friends' places and hotels. He had trouble finding anyone who would rent to him, in part because no one could be reached in New Orleans who could vouch that he was a good tenant.

His credit tanked because, he explained, without his old job, he couldn't make the payments on a truck that washed away. And he refused to pay the monthly bills he still receives for electricity, water and phone service from his demolished apartment in New Orleans.

He was in his apartment in New Orleans when Katrina hit, hunkering down with a friend and six family members. The eight of them spent close to 24 hours on the roof of the building before helicopters rescued them, he said.

One of the few things he retrieved from his sopping apartment were family recipes, including his mother's handwritten recipe for barbecue sauce. He still uses the water-stained papers to re-create the tastes of home.

"My plan was to stay in New Orleans, but my family was getting out," Morris said. "I was going to stay. I had work, and I was thinking like it was all temporary, but more and more revelations came to light. We started seeing the devastation on TV at the convention center."

Both he and his parents had lived in Los Angeles before, so when charitable organizations offered to buy plane tickets for people displaced by the disaster, this city was an obvious choice.

"It was familiar ground," Morris said. "I had my first teaching job here."

Still, when he arrived, he found his California teaching credential had lapsed. It took until April to get it back, and it was July before he began working as a substitute teacher for the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Morris credited a litany of charities and volunteers for helping him get back on his feet.

"It was so tricky, and my mind was not there," he said. "Some days, I was sharp, but other days I couldn't add two and two. ... A lot of what kept me from cracking up was their help, and going to classes and recognizing symptoms of what I'm going through."

Morris isn't the only hurricane victim to seek psychological help. In recent months, many local charities that provided evacuees with clothes and food in the first few months after the hurricane are now seeing those people return suffering from trauma and depression, said Annie Park with the United Way.

"People who are coming back now, it's not for food, it's for counseling," Park said. "We're calling it the second wave. The mental health needs are coming out now."

Nevertheless, for some evacuees here, life is beginning to return to normal.

After the hurricane, David Mince, 51, spent two days on a friend's roof in New Orleans before being rescued by helicopters. Representatives of the Dream Center, a Los Angeles charity, found him in a shelter in Baton Rouge three days later. He had never lived in Los Angeles, but had fond memories of a visit to Venice Beach 20 years ago.

"I had lost everything, and they came in and said they had a jet ready to go to Los Angeles, and they'd give us free rent for a year, so I jumped on it," Mince said.

The electrician looked for work at the Port of Los Angeles before recently finding an only-in-L.A. job working at a club in Hollywood, where he's already seen Mariah Carey and Lionel Richie. It's a big change from the shipyards he used to work in, Mince said.

As with Morris, Mince relied on local help to get back on his feet. He needed to get a California electrician's license before he could work, and Glendale Community College paid for his classes. Kaiser Permanente gave him free medical coverage, and USC contributed free dental care. The Dream Center provided free rooms, \$100 a week and transit passes.

"People have really opened their hearts to us," Mince said. "The people of L.A. have been the picture of compassion."

Mince plans to stay in his adopted city, citing the great beaches and, more surprisingly, the convenient public transit. Still, like a lot of his fellow evacuees, he misses some of his favorite Louisiana-style delicacies.

"Alligator," Mince said. "We have so many alligators there, we're the only state in the union that has an alligator season, like other states have a deer season."

Blanca Rodriguez, 37, is another Katrina evacuee who says she plans to stay here. Rodriguez, her husband, Raphael, and their four children live in a comfortable if cramped two-bedroom apartment in Torrance.

But it was a long road there from New Orleans. The Rodriguezes evacuated from the four-bedroom house they owned the day before Katrina hit, and returned only briefly to see the damage and to salvage what they could.

"When I got back, I just saw everything destroyed," Rodriguez said. "I don't want to think about it. I don't want to go back. ... Even before the hurricane, I didn't like New Orleans."

The Rodriguezes had lived in Los Angeles from 1985 to 1995, and drove back to the city last September once they realized they couldn't live in their Louisiana house anymore. They spent September and part of October in a local Salvation Army shelter, where they got food, clothes and counseling.

Then a Torrance apartment building owner asked the charity to send him a family he could help. He gave the Rodriguezes the apartment they now live in -- rent-free until Raphael Rodriguez found a job in June. Using hundreds of dollars in donations from the United Way and other charities, Raphael and Blanca Rodriguez drove to New Orleans, packed their remaining dry furniture into a U-Haul, and sold their washing machine for the gas money to get back to Torrance. The family is using insurance money to rebuild the house in New Orleans, and hopes the sale will help them buy a house in California.

One reason she is determined to make a new life here, Rodriguez said, is that her children like it. Not that the transition has been easy for them.

They miss New Orleans, and all have had bouts with depression. But they're also making friends and fitting in at their new schools, they said.

Michael, the oldest, is perhaps the most optimistic.

"We have family here. We know California like the back of our hand," he said.