

Katrina

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ground around the tires of his 2005 Dodge Magnum station wagon had become a puddle. Then, a few hours later, it had become like a stream rising over the bottom of the tires.

"The water just started rising gradually over a course of hours. It didn't just rush in," he recalled. "I didn't know where the water was coming from. It wasn't raining anymore. I was wondering why the water was rising."

He found out soon enough.

A collector of unique pens, Hooks turned on an ink pen radio. He heard news that levees, built only to withstand a Category 3 hurricane, had broken and the abutting Lake Pontchartrain was seeping into the city. Hooks and thousands of New Orleans residents were suddenly hit with a nightmare.

It was the beginning of one of the deadliest natural disasters in U.S. history and the most costly, possibly surpassing \$212 billion for rebuilding. It was also a political disaster for President Bush, whose already sliding popularity rating plummeted to 40 percent during the disaster, the lowest point of his presidency. Both Blacks and Whites were furious about the slowness of the administration's response to the more than 60,000 people at the Superdome, begging for emergency aid three days before it came. There was no running water, electricity or air conditioning. It was mayhem as fights and robberies took place among the desperate crowd.

Michael Brown, director of the Federal Emergency Management Administration, resigned Sept. 12 under scorching criticism and endless finger-pointing for the

botched FEMA response. It was months after his resignation that he finally admitted culpability.

Initially, he blamed state and local officials and state officials blamed him. National Guard troops escalated the tension with orders to "shoot to kill" people who appeared to be looting.

The disaster quickly revealed to the world deep social ills and a steadfast racial divide. The mostly poor Black residents of New Orleans' lower Ninth Ward could not afford to evacuate the city and their homes received the greatest destruction.

Hooks' horror story is only one of thousands as he was faced with single-handedly saving the lives of nine people, including his own.

"I told them that the water was rising and to get their stuff together — anything they could take with them that they might need," said Hooks, a former sergeant in the U.S. Army. Leaning heavily on his military training and his faith, the deacon at Stronger Hope Baptist Church made life or death decisions within seconds.

He took the baby first, treading through calf-deep water in some places and shoulder-deep water in others. He cradled the baby in his arms until the water was too deep. Then he alternated between lifting her to his shoulder and raising her in the air.

He took the newborn a mile and a half to Stronger Hope Baptist on Galvez Street, which at that moment was dry and appeared safe. He looked around, but found no one. There was no time to conduct a search of the building. He laid her on a pew and returned for her mother.

Back at the house, the

baby's mother mounted his back. One at a time, he returned for another person until he'd assisted all eight people to safety at the church. Struggling through the water, he saw others saving lives. The official death toll stands at 1,326 people and still rises as bodies are found several months later in the rubble and abandoned houses.

"It was a very traumatic experience for me to go through. And to see dead bodies lying around, it was bad," Hooks said.

At the Stronger Hope Baptist Church, Hooks found the church janitor with his sister and mother. All three were on prescription medicines and preferred to go to the Superdome where they thought they could get assistance. Hooks borrowed a boat from a man who had been using it to help people to safety and rowed the janitor and his family part of the way to the Superdome, and then they walked about a half mile.

Hooks believed the church would be at least a temporary safe haven for his group that included six women. He was concerned about how they would be treated at the Superdome, so they remained at the church.

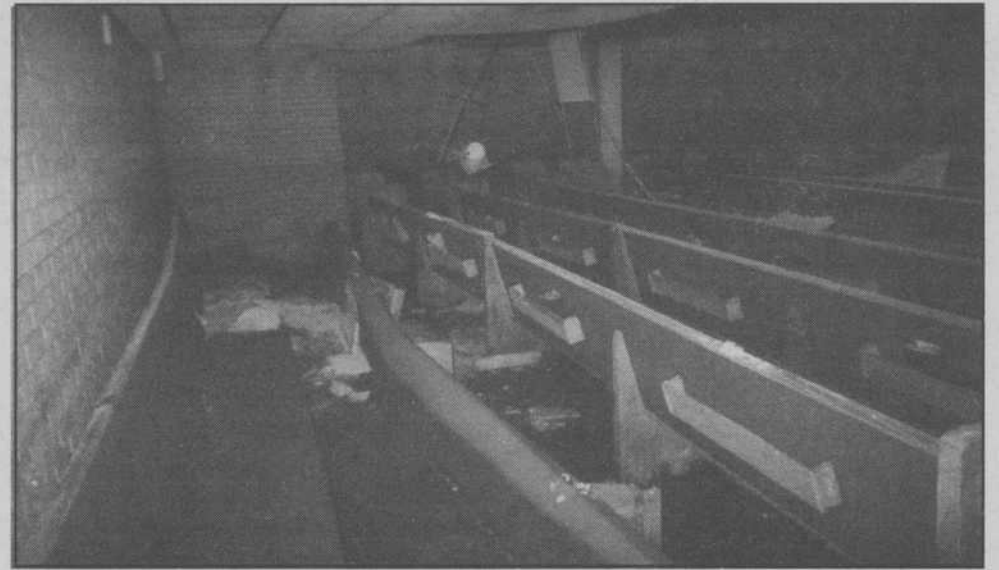
For food, they ate the leftovers from a church picnic. But Hooks sensed more danger as the water kept rising on the second day. On the third day, he was unable to remove the boat from the first floor of the church because of the water pressure outside the door. He swam from the building about two blocks to reach dry land and walked again to the Superdome to find National Guard troops.

There, he communicated the urgency of saving his niece and her baby. Within hours, the National Guard sent a helicopter to the roof of the church and rescued Hooks' mother, the infant, the 11-year-old boy and Hooks' other niece.

Tanika Turner, the boy's mother, quickly stuffed his pockets with contact numbers for relatives, so she could find him wherever he was taken.

The pilot promised to return immediately, but didn't, said Turner. When they heard a helicopter approaching, they climbed through a window and up a ladder to the roof, but none stopped.

"There was lots of looting and gunfire in the middle of the night. Every night, I feared that someone would break into the church looking for something when all of us were in there... It was really scary, hard for every-



Sentinel-Voice photo courtesy of Nakia Hooks

Hooks took refuge inside Stronger Hope Baptist Church, then was rescued from the roof. Pastor Rev. J. C. Profit Jr. says he does not know when the sanctuary can be used again.

body," Turner recalled.

Having slept on the roof of the church for the third night, Turner reached her lowest point around 4:00 a.m. "Basically, I just wanted to die. I just wanted everything to end," she said. "I think the small bit of sanity I had was that I was trying to hold on for my son."

Hundreds of others also waited on rooftops of homes and businesses, on bridges, floated in boats and makeshift devices. Black and other clerical leaders across the nation went into action, providing food, shelter and transportation for victims.

"Everything we did in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we do every day. We just extended it to a larger scale," said the Rev. Lionel Green of St. Paul A.M.E. Church in Lake Charles, La. "The Black community was not surprised when the church did what it did."

Finally, on the third day, a helicopter lowered over the roof of Stronger Hope Baptist Church. Turner, Hooks, his mother, his sister and brother were taken to the overpass of I-10 and Clearview Parkway where they searched for those rescued earlier while awaiting bus transportation to Baton Rouge. But the others were nowhere to be found.

Nearly 7,000 people are still reported missing after Katrina. The splitting of families in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is among the most painful aspects of the tragedy.

"Katrina almost carried us back to the days of slavery, where families were broken up and shipped to different areas," said Rev. Thomas B. Brown Jr., pastor of the Union Bethel A.M.E. Church of Baton Rouge. "Little kids not knowing where their mothers and fathers are, elderly people not knowing where their children are."

Hooks was fortunate. Within hours, he would learn by calling Texas relatives on

a cell phone that the newborn and her mother were safe with a cousin in Dallas. Turner quickly found her son, also safe in Dallas. Those numbers she had stuffed in his pocket paid off.

Once in Baton Rouge, Hooks' brother took him and his family to relatives in Gloster, Miss. Hooks ended up in Arlington, Texas, where he was stationed by his job to continue his work as a nurse recruiter. He now awaits insurance estimates to repair his water-soaked home.

The nauseating stench of mold and mildew hang heavily in the air of the city on the day of his first return to New Orleans in mid September. The receded water had left dried bacteria, traces of feces, contaminated waste, dead animals, people and debris across the city. Thousands of houses are blighted with water stains up to the roofs. Block after block, piles of rubble and debris sit in front of houses now uninhabitable. FEMA officials have marked in red each one that has been inspected for bodies.

Hooks' Dodge Magnum sits where he left it having soaked under water for weeks. He and Jermaine Parker, a neighborhood friend since childhood swat away flying insects as they reflect on the horrors.

"This looks like a war zone here. You got cars, you got houses just smelling and gnats flying everywhere," Parker said. "I came back and saw my house, and I really wanted to cry. I really want to cry right now. Because we don't have nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing at all."

Inside Hooks' home, the stench is worse. Mud is caked to the living room floor. Small electronics, kitchen utensils and overturned furniture are strewn about the house, having floated under water. His new furniture is all destroyed.

"The most difficult moment is being able to come back here and start the rebuilding process," he said. He had anticipated moving back into the house in January, resuming his dream of living near his mother. Being back is also a relief for his mother, who has lived in New Orleans for 46 years.

"Oh, I feel real good about being able to get back," said Bessie Hooks. "I just thank God that my family is alright. My hopes for the next few months are to get somebody to work on the house and try to get it rebuilt."

The fate of Hooks' church, Stronger Hope, is not as certain.

"We have a totally devastated circumstance on hand," said the pastor, Rev. J. C. Profit Jr., who is now leasing a house in San Antonio, Texas. "We have a long journey ahead of us."

But he has surveyed the damages and intends to rebuild and move back to New Orleans after receiving estimates from the insurance.

"But the building is not my greatest loss," Profit said. "My greatest loss is to have my people displaced all over the country." Of 350 members, he has located approximately 110 of them. Some are as far away as New York and Albuquerque, N.M. Some may never return.

He admits it has been painful.

"But you don't question God. You accept what transpired as his permissive will through the circumstances of nature. And when God brings his ultimate will, he said, 'All things work together for good for them that love the Lord and are called according to his purpose.'"

Meanwhile, Hooks is hoping for miracles. "I've lost everything," he said, surveying the dank, musty living room. "It's all gone."

This project is a cooperative effort between the National Newspaper Publishers Association and the Baltimore Afro.



Nakia Hooks and his mother, Bessie, stand inside their gutted home in New Orleans. After saving her and the lives of seven others during the flood disaster caused by Hurricane Katrina, he is hopeful they can move out of a trailer, supplied by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and back into his home sometime this spring.