

An ‘ambitious survivor’ of Hurricane Katrina

Five years later, a Hurricane Katrina evacuee continues to look forward

Editor’s Note: Hurricane Katrina made landfall outside New Orleans at approximately 6:10 a.m. local time August 29, 2005. The ensuing storm claimed at least 1,836 lives and displaced thousands of people. Justin Orvold was a resident of New Orleans when the hurricane hit, and in the aftermath moved to Seattle. (He was previously interviewed by The Voice for an article in the April 2006 issue.) This is his story, five years later.

LISA WOOD
University House Resident

Justin Orvold left for Lake Charles, La., with some of his neighbors in the Ninth Ward the day before Hurricane Katrina touched down. He was thankful he didn’t have to go to the Superdome and was “beyond words” when they lifted the blackout



PHOTO BY LISA WOOD

Justin Orvold moved to Seattle in 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

after only 24 hours so he could eventually go back and shuffle through the wreckage to claim what was left of his belongings.

Justin had spent four days in Lake Charles and “just like everyone else, was watching my home float away on TV.”

Even after five years that sober realization brings a hard truth to Justin’s eyes as

he sits in a coffee shop in Seattle.

An artist and an educator

Justin was 16 years old when he started painting on large canvases; shortly after that he received a full scholarship to Cor-

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nish College of the Arts in Seattle.

“When I was 16, it’s like I had to paint on large canvas, I knew it. Nothing could stop me. I had to paint,” he said.

He had no idea then that he would end up in New Orleans, as an art teacher for children with special needs. He grew up in a two-parent family with no issues, which helped him maintain his focus.

“We were just an average middle-class family without the middle-class attitude,” he said.

In 2005, Justin went to the Ninth Ward in New Orleans to teach special education, and it was there that “all that looking through a glass window went away.”

As a teacher of students in extreme poverty, Justin got experience being a voice for those children. Speaking up on their behalf to help them get their basic needs met was a new skill Justin had never needed before, but one that in the very near future he would have to utilize for himself as well.

In August 2005, with Hurricane Katrina bearing down on New Orleans and the Ninth Ward, Justin’s entire world was turned on its side. Thank goodness for good friends and the ability to move to higher ground.

On Sept. 2, 2005 Justin chose to come back home to Portland because he had family there.

“New Orleans was closed for a month and I went back after it opened up. I drove through the city to evaluate the damage for two or three days, and I shipped what was left of my belongings home. I came home because I had no job, no way to pay the rent in New Orleans,” he said.

Torn from the life he knew in New Orleans, Justin spent three months sleeping on couches, his home and nearly all his possessions lost.

Between August and October 2005, Justin was spending his own money try-

ing to maintain. He stayed in Centralia with a friend working for his construction company; he also stayed with a friend in Tacoma for a month.

After that three-month period and having made many phone calls, Justin was told he could pick any Housing Authority in Washington to receive his Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) benefits.

Justin chose Seattle Housing Authority. Around Halloween of that year, the Housing Authority connected Justin with a private landlord. Largely in part to all the advocacy skills he learned while working with his students in New Orleans, Justin now resides in a safe, affordable Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-leased apartment in the Beacon Hill area of Seattle. After being an “evacuee,” Justin calls Seattle home.

“My FEMA experience was awesome. My experience wasn’t traumatic like people want to hear,” Justin said. “Washington really advocated for people. Linda Taylor at The Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle really took me under her wing. They are the biggest help by far.”

The Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle’s mission is to help people become self-sufficient.

“In Justin’s case the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle afforded him the opportunity for a new career that he had a talent and a passion for (woodworking), reliable transportation, hugs and meals. We were a liaison between all the other social services in Justin’s immediate area,” said Linda Taylor, Director of The Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. “In 2005, we must have helped 5,000 people. 2,500 of those were FEMA numbers, the others were family members.”

Justin’s desire to reconnect with his old friends is still evident by the distance in his eyes. He shares that when he left New Orleans in 2005, “it ended prematurely. My whole life was there. I am missing everything, all my friends, everything. I have one

Local efforts to aid Gulf Coast evacuees

Needless to say, when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in August 2005, the disaster had a profound impact on the area’s population. The numbers of families that had to uproot themselves and move to parts unknown was staggering.

Many of them ultimately relocated to Washington state.

“Thousands of households moved their way here to Washington from the Gulf Coast,” said Richard Krikava, External Affairs Specialist for the Local Region 10 FEMA Office.

Once the evacuees started to trickle into Seattle, one of the numerous organizations that reached out to them was the King and Kitsap County Local Chapter of the Red Cross. More than 200 local Red Cross employees and volunteers provided 1,300 people with their basic needs. “Basic needs are basic needs, regardless of

the location or the disaster,” said Katherine Boury, communications director for the local Red Cross chapter.

At the same time, people were also introduced to Linda Taylor, director of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. The group’s main focus “is to help people become self-sufficient.”

During that time, local agencies pulled together to help reduce the trauma of each individual who arrived from the Gulf Coast.

Seattle Housing Authority also contributed to that effort.

“From the Gulf Coast area, 160 people were helped,” said Virginia Felton, Seattle Housing Authority’s communications director.

Evacuees came to Seattle in different stages — some wounded physically or emotionally, and many found refuge here. In considering their stories, it’s easy to see the national scope of a regional disaster.

friend who stayed there, all the rest were scattered all across the United States.

“I have been back three times to visit and reabsorb my old city. I have had a relationship with the city of New Orleans since the first time I went when I was 19. I do plan on living there again.”

He goes on to share how the cool historical parts of the city are still the same, unspoiled by the destruction that the hurricane had wrought.

“I do plan on retiring there” he says with a vibrant glimmer in his eyes.

Even after all this time he still has a yearning about him — a feeling of something gone unfinished. Of something cut short by a disaster he had absolutely no control over.

Justin has accomplished a lot since being

a full-time Washingtonian. He has picked up two Associates of Science degrees in woodworking, while trying to make a living selling his artwork.

His large canvas paintings have been on display at Harborview Medical Center, and have been picked up by a gallery in Portland. He also had a showing in Seattle in July.

And, just like the city of New Orleans, Justin has “just moved on.”

“I am being productive. I have had a career change, and a lifestyle change,” he said. “I am glad I am here and I’m proud of my progress. I’ll always have a connection with NOLA.

“I am a young, ambitious survivor, and I look forward.”