

16 years after Katrina, Hurricane Ida wreaks havoc, displaces alums from New Orleans to N.J.

By Ella Chen & Wilson Bailey

As rain from Hurricane Ida pounded on the windows, Claire Huff ('20) and her roommates grabbed all the brooms they could find to sweep water out of their Tulane University dorm room.

New Orleanians who attempted to evacuate discovered gas shortages and sold-out flights. Huff and fellow Tulane student Sophie Lazear ('19) decided to stay put. Tulane Housing originally assured Lazear that generators would supply power during outages. As she learned hours later, they did not.

"We were hearing a lot about a big storm that was coming to hit us," Huff said, "but we didn't truly know how bad it would be."

Exactly 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana, causing over \$161 billion in damages, Ida struck New Orleans. The effects were felt from the coasts of Cuba to the subways of New York.

In the days before the storm, Huff noticed that students who had not lived on the Gulf Coast were unaware of the potential severity of hurricanes.

"I had a lot of people come up to me and say, 'oh, you know, it's just rain. It's going to be okay,'" Huff said. "But there was a time when we thought [Hurricane] Harvey was just going to be rain, and then, obviously, it wasn't."

Stuck in their dorm, Huff and her roommates watched the new movies "He's All That" and "Kissing Booth 3."

"We just needed to watch something kind of silly and dumb, so we weren't bogged down with more stress," Huff said.

In the same building, Lazear discovered five leaks in her room. With her roommates out of town, Lazear scrambled to move their belongings out of the way and place towels where needed.

"It was really stressful because it was spreading a lot faster than I was expecting," Lazear said. "I was trying to figure out where the leaking was coming from on the floor. The wall is a concrete block, so I thought, 'It can't come from a wall.' But it did."

Still haunted by the memory of Katrina, many New Orleanians evacuated as Ida approached, but the city's new levee system protected those who stayed.

According to senior Jon Collins Deal, who has family in New Orleans, these two factors were vital in preventing Ida from becoming "Katrina 2.0."

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— CLAIRE HUFF ('20) —

"People took it a lot more seriously," Deal said. "Did my family and friends not take Katrina seriously? Maybe not as much as they should have, but they heard Ida was coming, and everyone fled to Houston."

Many members of the SJS community opened up their homes to relatives and friends fleeing the storm. Senior Kenny Burke took in three family members who had evacuated New Orleans two days before the storm hit. Usually a six-hour drive, it took them almost twelve hours to reach Houston due to snarled traffic.

"One of the challenges was keeping them preoccupied so they didn't have to think about what was happening to their home," Burke said.

English teacher Allyson LaBorde was surprised when her mother and stepfather called her three days before the storm, to let her know they were coming to Houston. Unable to find a hotel room, LaBorde's parents stayed the first night with her and her two cats.

"I was glad the cats were there to

distract them," LaBorde said. "My mother is 80 and in a wheelchair, and it's not always easy for her to get around."

The storm not only displaced families, but separated them. When Deal's family friends' from New Orleans evacuated, they split up, with half going to Mississippi and the others coming to Houston. After the storm, Deal didn't hear much from his extended family and friends.

"The lack of communication was worrisome," Deal said. "Once we found out where everyone was, it was a sigh of relief."

Just four years earlier in 2017, Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Houston, dropping more than 60 inches of rain and causing \$125 billion in damages, second only to Katrina.

Irene Vázquez ('17), whose family came to Houston in the aftermath of Katrina, was at a remote farm for a Yale freshman pre-orientation program when Harvey made landfall.

"We were entirely disconnected from the outside world," Vázquez said. "We were picking beans and working with some other volunteers. I told one of them I'm from Houston; they said there was this big storm coming. I had no idea."

Vázquez is now working as a freelance environmental reporter in New Jersey. When Ida came through Hoboken, she woke up to discover that the streets were still flooded from the night before. The inadequacy of New Jersey's infrastructure surprised Vázquez.

"In Houston, at least we have decent drainage, but there was standing water in the street for an entire day. It rained a lot, but it didn't rain that much," Vázquez said. "That water shouldn't have been there."

When Vázquez first moved away from the Gulf Coast, she assumed that flooding would no longer be part of her life. When she experienced the impact of a hurricane over 1,400 miles away, she felt emotionally drained.

"It's just that feeling of helplessness, seeing your home underwater and the places that you love suffer time and time again," Vázquez said. "It doesn't get any easier."

Deal said that hurricanes hitting near his family friends' home in Houma, Louisiana, have become the new normal. Within two months last year, three separate storms hit the Louisiana coast.

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— IRENE VÁZQUEZ ('17) —

"This is not their first rodeo," Deal said. "So I think they can come together, rebuild, and move to the future."

When the sun finally emerged, it revealed shattered glass and uprooted trees across the Tulane campus. Huff witnessed students walking outside and played the Beatles song, "Here Comes the Sun." Soon



Former Review editor Irene Vázquez discovers flooded streets in her Hoboken, New Jersey, neighborhood. Hurricane Ida struck Louisiana on Aug. 29 as a Category 4 storm; two days later, the remnants soaked the northeast, causing billions in damage.

PHOTO | Irene Vázquez

after, the power went out again due to eight major transmission lines in New Orleans losing power, leaving the city in the dark for weeks.

"Once we lost power, that's when everything turned into a scrambled mess," Huff said.

Tulane arranged for 37 coach buses to evacuate students to Houston. For Lazear, whose family had evacuated during past hurricanes, Ida was the first "bad" hurricane she experienced firsthand.

"Going back to Houston a week after classes started was frustrating," Lazear said, "but I did get to show some of my non-Houstonian friends from school around here."

Tulane moved classes online for one week, and students either returned home or stayed in Houston hotels.

"Some people had to do it last year when they got contact-traced," Lazear said. "So as weird as it is to live and take classes in hotels, it is not unique."

On Sept. 27, after almost a month away, Tulane students finally returned to campus.

"It feels like we've had three first days," Lazear said.

Even though New Orleans is a magnet for hurricanes, many of its residents have never considered moving. According to English teacher Kyle Dennon, who lived there after college, this originates from their attachment to the city's culture and history.

"It's somewhere that gets ingrained pretty deeply in your soul," Dennon said.

"It's a unique, strange part of the country, and you grow attached to it. It's not somewhere that can be written off."

While LaBorde agrees that New Orleanians are resilient, she also says that their resilience stems from an old but persistent culture of denial that makes it hard for them to accept climate change.

"New Orleanians have perfected this art of living," LaBorde said. "Sometimes I admire that, and sometimes I shake my head and think 'your levee should be twice as tall.'"

Hurricane Ida By The Numbers



82 DEATHS

172 MPH WINDS

\$96B IN DAMAGES