

HURRICANE KATRINA AFTERMATH

Some of eastern N.O. still underwater

Water marks, vandalism, sludge tell tale of devastation

By Gwen Filosa and Trymaine Lee
Staff writers

Vast stretches of eastern New Orleans remained flooded and filthy Monday, two weeks after Hurricane Katrina tore through the area.

Read Boulevard at Dwyer Road was under at least four feet of water in some places, marooning the 7th District Police Station, the 4th District Fire Department, Marion Abramson Senior High School and Joe Brown Memorial Park.

Access required a boat – and the will to risk exposure to probably toxic water, and the black-brown sludge beneath it.

At about 4 p.m., a fishing boat carrying contract-workers in blue decontamination suits dragged a second boat holding three corpses. The bodies were bloated and draped in black plastic.

The men on the boats would answer few questions, but one said they came from a nearby hospital. “Get out of there,” one boater yelled at a photographer and a cameraman viewing the scene.

“Respect the dead!” Abramson High, like much of the east, was a swampy mess filled with sludge — and eerie remnants of daily life before the hurricane.

From a blown-out window in Mr. Gibbs 10th-grade civics class, nearly a dozen not-so-long-forgotten essays clung to the walls, the only artifacts not wet or under water.

Bright red A's stood boldly against the mildeewing white-lined papers, along with the names of the students who wrote them: Yanna Davis, Demetria Myers, Lesha Bartholomew.

Soaked textbooks littered the classroom, the halls and most corridors.

A toppled metal detector lay in the mess.

The school's gym, cafeteria and auditorium were empty. A water mark on

the first-floor auditorium entrance showed that the building had flooded to a depth of at least six feet. In the front parking lot, about 30 cars were tossed about like Tonka toys, some having bashed into others.

Upstairs, two dead white rats lay in a science lab sink, and soggy pieces of ceiling left a trail through the hallways. The dank smell of decay wafted through the air, despite the sunlight splashing through shattered windows.

Contradicting rumors that hundreds of evacuees poured into the school for shelter, only



STAFF PHOTO BY ELLIS LUCIA

While the sign at Six Flags announces the amusement park is closed because of Hurricane Katrina, it doesn't begin to tell the story, as parts of New Orleans, including Six Flags and Lake Forest Boulevard, remain underwater.



STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

to meet a watery grave, a stroll through the school on Monday revealed no corpses.

Outside the school's gates, in the lake that once was Read Boulevard, signs tilted like cat-tails in the still high, but receding, water.

For about 500 yards in each direction, there was nothing but water. Buildings along the near horizon were set in a shadowy haze, their business wrecked and strewn with rubble.

Chef Menteur Highway was

Bobby Rideau of eastern New Orleans was desperate on Monday not for food or clothing, but for a flashlight to help him get into his flooded home off Chef Menteur Highway. It has been two weeks since the city was hit by Hurricane Katrina.

dry, but here, too, businesses were ruined, as far as the eye could see, and on residential lots, religious statuary and yard ornaments were cracked or headless.

“It was like a bomb blew it open,” moving company manager Billy James, 43, said. “The whole place is shot. I lost cars, seven or eight trucks,” he said of the firm, called The Movers. “We're starting from scratch. We'll probably have to expand to the north shore or Baton Rouge.”

James conceded that hun-

dreds of customers probably lost their belongings in the trashed warehouse at 8200 Chef Menteur. “They may not want it,” James said of the stored goods. Most of his 50 employees were safe and accounted for, he said – except one man, Ray, whose last name temporarily had slipped James' mind.

Ray was believed to have ended up at the Houston Astrodome. “They scooped him up on the street down here,” company driver Sidney Byrd, 53, said.

“He wasn't expecting to go to Houston,” said James, cracking a smile.

“He wasn't happy about that. He'll be calling for a bus ticket.”

James said the owner of the business wants to keep The Movers going, but it's not possible in New Orleans right now.

The company parking lot showed signs of looting. Someone tried to rip off the steering wheel of one big truck, leaving a burst of exposed wires below the dash. The giant padlock on the warehouse was intact, but someone managed to take off the bolts and smaller lock on the other side to get inside.

Though mostly abandoned to U.S. Army soldiers and some random dogs, the east was not entirely without signs of life on Monday.

Orlando Pena Morales, 59, a Cuban immigrant who moved to the region in 1979, rode out the storm in his trailer off Chef Menteur.

Some mobile homes in the trailer park, behind Tokyo Modeling in the 7700 block, were on their sides and Morales' belong-

ings were ruined. He and his neighbor had painted the parking lot with an appeal for food and water.

A carpenter by trade,

Morales laughed as he recalled his decision to stay through the storm. “I didn't want to go anywhere. I don't want to go anywhere. I like New Orleans. I don't know why. You drink the Mississippi River.”

Morales said the floodwaters at one point rose up to his neck. “What am I gonna do?” he said.

Next door, at the Sugar Bowl, floors and bowling lanes had buckled and bowling balls littering the sidewalk. Daylight came in through the wall that once backed the pinsetting equipment. A video poker machine looked as if it had been pummeled and pushed onto its side.

At Chef and Downman, as in neighborhoods all across eastern New Orleans, the floods had receded Monday to reveal bleached-brown grass and a coating of scum. Many a ranch-style, one-story home was spray-painted with zeros, signaling that the place had been searched and that no one was inside, dead or alive.

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Jeff works to get back to business

Firms allowed in to begin cleanup

By Rob Nelson
Staff writer

Tossing ruined ceiling tiles into the trash amid the pungent smell of mildew and mold, Dave Beard had a simple reason for returning to his debris-ridden workplace Monday.

“I've got to make a living,” said Beard, who works for Pemco, a Harvey company that builds power plants for the oil and gas industry. “The sooner we get back on our feet, the sooner we can make some money.”

Businesses throughout Jefferson Parish made a firm push to resume commerce on Monday, the first day leaders officially allowed company owners and some of their employees back in the parish in an effort dubbed Operation Jumpstart Jefferson.

Beard endured miles of heavy traffic along U.S. 90 to return to Jefferson on Monday morning. Annoyed by officials' efforts to keep him out because he lives in LaPlace and had no proof of his

Jefferson work address, Beard said he drove around the barricade and made his way to work. There, he found a large hole in the second-story roof, spilling water, debris and mold throughout the building.

Meanwhile, the smell of spoiled chicken wafted through the World of Wings restaurant in the 1600 block of Manhattan Boulevard in Harvey. Co-owners and brothers Kerry Nichols and Koy Nichols spent the day chucking out the chickens and cleaning the store, eyeing a re-opening later this month.

Koy Nichols praised the speed of Jefferson's rebuilding. “The recovery has been faster than we thought,” he said. He lamented, however, the financial difficulty for some of his workers.

“The worst part is that the employees take the hardest hit,” he said, adding that his staff depends heavily on tips and hourly wages.

Several business managers said they are still searching for their workers, many of whom fled Hurricane Katrina and are now scattered throughout the country.

At the Heritage Plaza office building in Metairie, Roddy Orgeron, owner of a Mandeville computer consulting company, and

two of his buddies hauled several computers and boxes of equipment down 16 flights of stairs. Orgeron's client asked him to retrieve computers from the office, which had sustained roof and water damage, Orgeron said.

With sweat pouring through his shirt in the powerless building, Orgeron said the insurance company badly needed their computer files. “When everything is flooded, you do what you have to do,” he said. “They needed these as soon as possible.”

Down the road, in the 3500 block of Veterans Boulevard in Metairie, Sherry Perkins and her husband, Ed Perkins, spent the day cleaning out one branch of their restaurant, Lee's Original New Orleans Hamburgers.

While their Metairie home remains flooded, the couple, who sent their children out of town for school, will live in an apartment above the restaurant.

Luckily, the business suffered little damage, Sherry Perkins said. “This is home,” she said. “This is our life, these two businesses. As soon as (Sheriff) Harry Lee says Jefferson is unlocked for business, we're ready.”

In the meantime, the couple continues to commute from

Oakdale, a four-hour haul from Metairie.

At Dornigac's Food Center in Metairie, Scott Miller, director of operations, said rainwater spilled into the store from a roof tear, but several workers returned to aid with cleanup.

The damage “wasn't as bad as we thought, and it wasn't as good as we thought,” he said, saying the 40-year-old store could reopen late next week. In red spray paint, Miller wrote on plywood covering the store's front windows: “Opening Soon!”

While stores planned reopenings, several banks and savings associations swung their doors open Monday. At a Hibernia branch in the Marrero Shopping Center, Mary Meyers, 68, said she was the first in line at the bank at 8:30 a.m., more than two hours before it opened.

With two armed soldiers guarding the door and about 40 people in line about 11 a.m., Meyers said she needed some of her Social Security money to pay bills. Surprisingly upbeat, Meyers said she remains confident in the metro area's upturn. “It'll come back,” she said. “It'll bounce back. New Orleans will bounce back, too.”

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