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THE KATRINA YEAR

## **Storm's Escape Routes: One Forced, One Chosen**

By [SHAILA DEWAN](#)

ATLANTA, Aug. 23 — The small van, painted a heraldic bright green, is planted like a flag amid the frenetic commerce of Midtown, claiming a speck of territory for Louisiana. Customers line up at the window to order New Orleans-style snowballs: fluffy concoctions of ice, flavor and condensed milk so delicate they immediately begin to puddle in the heat.

To Kenneth Woodfin, an entrepreneurial 26-year-old who fled New Orleans a year ago as Hurricane Katrina approached, the van is not only his first business venture, but also an emblem of his family's new, more prosperous life in Atlanta. His younger sister works the window. His older sister, a bank teller, makes substantially more than she did back home, and her husband has landed his first white-collar job, at a car rental company. The couple is looking for a house to buy.

"It took some getting used to, but now I'm like, I love this place," Mr. Woodfin said. "It was like an eye-opening experience."

Among Atlanta's thousands of Hurricane Katrina evacuees, the Woodfins are not an anomaly. Many came here by choice and have put down roots, embracing what they say is a higher standard of living and melting into thriving neighborhoods almost without a trace. Some evacuees have even turned down offers to return home and resume their old jobs.

But for many New Orleanians who went west instead of east, especially those borne by fate rather than preference, exile has been a very different experience.

In Houston, it can seem as if the storm never ended. Many evacuees remain in restless limbo, unable to return home but alienated from their new city. Some are still reeling from trauma, others complain of discrimination against people from New Orleans. Still others have lapsed into old habits of unemployment and crime.

No matter where they ended up, of course, evacuees are not at peace over the destruction of their homes and communities. Everywhere, people are struggling with stress-related illnesses, insurance companies, nightmares and even basic needs like stable housing.

But the divergent experiences of those who went to Houston and those who went to Atlanta suggest that recovery depends on more than individual resources and demographics. Just as important are less quantifiable factors: a sense of welcome and connection, the presence of

friends and family, even how narrowly they survived the disaster.

Atlanta's evacuees, more likely to have left New Orleans before the flooding, often express enthusiasm for starting over in a place where even dishwashers start at \$7 an hour. It is not unusual to hear people here declare the hurricane a net positive in their lives. In Houston, a city that offers similar economic opportunity, the mood lies on the far side of resignation, closer to homesickness and despair.

"It's different from New Orleans as far as opportunity, but they don't want to open it up to people from Louisiana," said Alphonso Thomas, a 34-year-old evacuee in Houston. "Over 90 percent of the people here are either suicidal or hopeless."

Houston is home to nearly twice as many evacuees as Atlanta — an estimated 150,000 are there now, compared with a more manageable 84,000 in Atlanta, which partly explains the difference.

According to a recent study by Appleseed, a public interest law group, the huge numbers of evacuees in Houston strained resources like housing, despite the outpouring of money and help.

But there is a second, perhaps more significant, difference. It dates back to the storm itself, and whether people were willing or able to get out of its way.

### Finding Their Way

At the invitation of the mayor, Houston received busload after busload of people who had lived — some just barely — through the flood and its dark aftermath. Thousands came directly from the hellish conditions of the Superdome, arriving with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. Although they were grateful — "Thanks Houston" bumper stickers soon appeared — they had not chosen their destination, and many knew not a soul in town. At one point, more than 27,000 people were staying at the Astrodome and its supplemental shelters.

But those who came to Atlanta had not waited until the storm hit. Once the hurricane warnings began, many came on their own steam, often in their own cars (the Woodfins, for example, had a caravan of three). That proved to be a tremendous advantage, because a lack of transportation has been a leading complaint for less fortunate evacuees in both cities.

And many evacuees felt more at home with, even inspired by, Atlanta's long tradition of black leadership and success.

While several New Orleans congregations have started thriving churches in Houston, none can boast a \$500,000 donation from Tyler Perry, the black entertainment mogul and New Orleans native. Mr. Perry, who now lives in Atlanta, gave that money to Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church, a New Orleans congregation that opened a branch in an Atlanta

suburb and says its membership there has soared.

Long before the hurricane, more New Orleanians had moved to Atlanta than to any other city, so evacuees had places to stay and familiar faces to guide them.

“Definitely it helped us, just in terms of getting around, because Atlanta is a huge city,” said Anita Roberson Taylor, whose daughter had moved to Atlanta a month before the storm. “She opened her home to us.”

That network also gave a boost to people like Anthony Fields, Mr. Woodfin's brother-in-law, who was having trouble finding a job until he ran into an old New Orleans friend who had been in Atlanta for two years and managed a car rental company.

The friend got Mr. Fields an interview for a sales agent position, which normally requires a college degree. Mr. Fields, 22, who formerly worked as an electrical assistant, got the job.

Hurricane Katrina, Mr. Fields said, had given him the push he needed to get ahead. “Some may be blind to the fact,” he said, “but when all is said and done, it was a good thing.”

#### Some Work as Others Wait

If the DNA of cities could be tested, Houston and Atlanta, each with metropolitan populations of just over five million, would be a close match. Both are sprawling, adolescent Sun Belt behemoths whose idea of density is a two-story apartment complex. Unemployment is low, as is the cost of living (though not compared with New Orleans). Atlanta, if anything, is the more competitive city, with slightly higher prices and rents.

But it is Houston where the mayor, Bill White, has resorted to publicly pleading with able evacuees to go to work. A survey in June of the 90,000 evacuees in the city's free housing program, commissioned by the city from Zogby International, showed that only a fifth were employed. (Another 60,000 evacuees were not in the program and are thought to be families with greater resources and skills, many of whom like Houston and are thriving.)

Still, the mayor's reasoning was clear. More than 5,000 jobs are available in Houston, Mr. White said, and nearly 70 percent of the adult evacuees in the housing program were wage earners before the storm. Only about a third, including the elderly and disabled, were on federal assistance. The problem was, though, that most of those who had worked made less than \$15,000 a year, many at hotel and restaurant jobs that are not as abundant in Houston. Nearly a third are 55 or older, and most are single women, many with young children. More than 40 percent have no health insurance.

There is no comparable demographic information about the storm evacuees in Atlanta. But even though about the same percentage of evacuees in both cities lived in public housing before the storm, the widely held perception is that Atlanta got a majority of the New Orleans

professional class. Interviews with pastors, officials at aid agencies and job counselors suggest that finding employment has been far easier here.

Many evacuees did not even bother to ask for help, said Mark O'Connell, the president of [United Way](#) in Atlanta, leaving civic leaders uncertain of what was needed.

"I have to believe the largest number of evacuees self-navigated," Mr. O'Connell said. "This community, like Houston, was willing to do anything. The challenge for us all along was knowing what to do."

Angela Stewart, who evacuated to Atlanta with her husband and two other couples, quickly found a teaching job that paid almost as well as her previous position as an assistant principal and bought a new, larger house.

"Everyone is working," Ms. Stewart said of the six adults, "all the kids are in school, and things are just moving along. We have just picked up a new life here — very different, but very nice."

Many of Houston's evacuees say they are trying to find work. In the city's survey, more than half reported that they were still looking for a job, and a quarter said they had submitted 10 applications or more. Some, like young mothers who had relied on family networks for survival, required training as basic as what to wear to a job interview. But even people with white-collar experience or graduate degrees have reported trouble finding a job. Others, still uncertain about whether and when they will return home, have not yet looked.

The hurdles in Houston include lower wages, more rigorous qualifications, and a reluctance to invest in employees who might return home at any time. D. B. Spurlock, who taught school in New Orleans, said he failed the Texas teacher certification test. Mr. Spurlock now works seven days a week as a security guard, for \$8 an hour. Shawna Kimbrough, a carpenter and welder, said she had been offered the same wage, \$8 an hour, for work that paid twice that back home. At age 70, Lutisha Smith said, she had to go back to school to qualify for the same job, nurse's assistant, that she was paid more money to do in New Orleans.

Wallace J. Forte, 57, an experienced forklift operator, said he was being offered entry-level positions at \$6 an hour. "They look at you, like, 'Tough,'" Mr. Forte said.

All the same, Mr. Spurlock said he and his family would sooner move from Houston to Atlanta or Florida than return to New Orleans. "I want a change of life," he said. "I feel like the government's giving you an opportunity to get on your feet with [FEMA](#)."

### Battling a Mind-set

"Shake your neighbor's hand and tell them, 'This won't last long,'" said the pastor from New Orleans, bellowing to the displaced flock of the New Home Family Worship Center on a

recent Sunday in the rented ballroom of a Houston Hilton.

“This won’t last long!” the congregation said.

“If you get to the point where you feel like you want to jump off a building, or swallow you some pills, remember: it’s temporary,” the pastor, Robert Blakes Jr., said. “It’s not going to last. Shake your neighbor’s hand and tell them, ‘It’s temporary.’”

“It’s temporary!”

Mr. Blakes’s mention of suicide was more than rhetorical excess. Depression and symptoms of post-traumatic stress have plagued evacuees in Houston, in part because of a pervasive sense of isolation. Unlike in Atlanta, where integration was rapid, the sheer number of evacuees in Houston has ensured that they have remained a separate category of resident, one other Houston residents regard with ambivalence.

The local news, first filled with proud stories of the city’s superhuman welcome, followed with reports of evacuees fighting in schools, crowding public clinics and, worst of all, contributing to a significant spike in the city’s crime rate. In Atlanta, that kind of news was rare.

“I think they feel discouraged because they’re being so stereotyped right now,” said Sandra Dorsey, an evacuee working at another transplanted church in Houston. “It’s almost like everything that happens is because of people from Louisiana. If you’re not strong, that can overtake you.”

While those who fled to Atlanta before the storm watched the devastation on television, many Houston evacuees lived through it, and their memories of chaos and corpses are persistent. It was several months and two hospitalizations before Rosemary Thomas, 75, realized she needed treatment for anxiety.

“When I’d wake up in the morning, I felt like I was dying, because I was seeing the same thing over and over and over,” said Ms. Thomas, who went to Houston after being guided by rescuers through chest-high water. “And I could still see the last body. I remember his arm. Like a tree or a log.”

While Mr. Blakes followed his congregants to Houston, his brother Samuel, also a pastor in New Orleans, opened another New Home church in Atlanta. But on a recent Sunday, Samuel Blakes delivered a very different sermon, one that centered on the importance of delegation and setting priorities. It was not a rallying cry for the dejected, but an admonishment to the busy, those who might be too preoccupied with new jobs, new houses and new schools to remember that God comes first.

Not all who came to Atlanta have had such pleasant distractions. Jobs for the unskilled are

hard to come by, and employers have complained about high absenteeism, said Jennifer Moore, a job counselor for evacuees, adding that her most challenging clients brought with them a healthy sense of entitlement to government handouts, even as they needed prodding to take advantage of training, child care and eye exams. Mental distress, family strife, evictions and substance abuse are on the rise, Ms. Moore said. The elderly, in particular, long to go home.

But Samuel Blakes, who describes his congregation as predominantly working class, said most were not looking back to New Orleans.

“I’ve had nothing but positive feedback, and I’ve heard nothing but positive things,” Mr. Blakes said. “For a lot of people, it’s just deliverance from a poverty mind-set. It’s been a real liberation where their minds are concerned. They’ve had the opportunity to see real possibilities.”

Tomorrow: In the small stores and factories of New Orleans, uncertainty and fear.

*Brenda Goodman contributed reporting for this article.*

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