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## Show and Tell

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, In 2006, a college professor found herself teaching freshmen  
 , composition students during the fall semester at Xavier  
 , University of Louisiana. This in itself was not unusual; what  
 , was different was that this "fall" semester was starting in  
 , January, thanks to Hurricane Katrina. Whether an out-of-  
 , townner who rode out the storm on campus or a New Orleans  
 , native who lost everything to the disaster, each student had  
 , been affected in some way, as had their still-shaken professor  
 , who was aware that, in time, not only would the shock wear  
 , off but the all-important memories and stories would fade.  
 , Throughout the semester Laborde shared her writing and her  
 , photographs (most taken in her recovery work as an Exterior  
 , Damage Assessor for the City of New Orleans) in order to  
 , encourage students to share their own observations and  
 , experiences in the form of journal entries and essays.

**S**tanding before the class, I pulled out the pages I had shoved  
 inside the gradebook. The pages came from writing I had done  
 on my laptop during evacuation from Hurricane Katrina. I  
 explained to the students that I had written down everything, thinking  
 that I was recording history, knowing that I was living through an event  
 that was as horrific as it was important, believing that no detail was too  
 small to record.

I walked from around the podium and sat on the large oak desk.  
 "This semester," I told my students, "we will be writing about our

experiences as well as the experiences of others. "What you have lived through is important," I continued. "But as overwhelming and unforgettable as it seems right now, you will forget the little details, the very sights and scents that will bring this experience back to you in full color. That said, we will spend the semester saving these details in black and white. And one day many years from now, you'll be glad that you did."

And with that, we started a game of Show and Tell that would last through the semester. In a series of journal prompts and essay assignments, I showed them how I had experienced Katrina and encouraged them to do the same. I read my own words, I flashed my black-and-white photographs, and they responded by writing about their own experiences.

The next class day, I read to them. This time I chose a passage from an essay I had written about the Friday before the storm, a day that happened to be the last day of the first week of the fall semester – a semester that was about to be called to a sudden, unexpected end. I read to my students:

Earlier that evening, on my way to dinner and a movie with close friends, two of whom were colleagues, my cell phone rang. "Katrina's coming this way," Mom said. "I'm not taking any chances. Do you want to come with us?" Her call had come through to me effortlessly, clearly – luxuries that would be lost to us all in the days ahead. "Yeah, sure, Mom," I said, adding that I was driving and couldn't talk at the moment. Arriving minutes later, I mentioned my parents' plans to leave, and mine to join them. "Oh, I'm not leaving," William said. "We're just going to get a lot of rain." These details come back to me many days later, wrapped in a kind of peach fuzz haze reserved for childhood memories and hypnotic dreams.

My students wrote:

*Dear Diary, today is August 26, 2005  
I just got out of class, like around five  
My roommate and I were studying in our dorm  
Until my mother calls and warns me about a storm  
I ignore it and thought nothing of it  
Until the weather man got on TV and told us to run for it.  
Utterly confused  
I turned to my roommate and said, "What to do?"  
Now it's tomorrow and we still have no clue. —La'Kiraa Lillard*

*August 28, 2005: My roommate and I woke up to chaos and commotion while the ladies of St. Katharine Drexel Hall rampaged down to the first floor for a hall meeting. The hall advisors warned us of a hurricane that was to hit the next day and told us that if we were to leave to remember the school rules, meaning our absences would count against us. Later that evening, we were called back for another hall meeting to let us know that if we were going to leave, to only pack three days worth of clothing. Yeah, right. —Erin Hill*

Back in September, sitting in a crowded coffee house in Alexandria, Louisiana surrounded by other evacuees of both Katrina and Rita, all wrinkled and worried and tapping away on laptops, I had written about evacuation.

In January, I read to my students:

Evacuating an area located at the edge of a continent is not an easy procedure – there are only so many routes to take, and the panicky exodus involves hours spent in gridlocked traffic. Afraid that you'll run out of gas along the way, you choose to broil in your slow-moving car rather than run the AC. Before you leave, there are hotel reservations to be made or family and friends to beg for quick lodging. Pets only complicate matters since most hotels will not take them and allergic

relatives don't want them around. Everyone rushes in a rat panic to gas stations and drugstores. People are forced to split the precious little time they have between boarding up windows, washing clothes, and packing what they absolutely *have to* bring along in case this is The Big One.

I left early in the evening. I took the back roads and found Hwy 1. Even though all I had to do was stay on Hwy 1 until I made it to Alexandria, I cannot tell you how many times I would suddenly realize that I was no longer on that road, that the highway had somehow slipped away from me and I was on some other field-rimmed and dark road, going the wrong way. I came upon hitchhikers who seemed to appear out of the darkness magically in one moment only to evaporate in the mist just as quickly. I passed houses, darkened and sleeping, and cars lined up at the side of cinder-block bars whose names were announced in crude and heavy letters. All this I passed on the road, or maybe I mean roads, to Alexandria, to yet another hurricane escape weekend, the warnings of weathermen ringing in my ears.

My students wrote of their own experiences and those of their friends. They described evacuations riding out the storm, scenes of panic and tedium and terror. Some details were similar, but not one story was the same.

*As I'm outside struggling to find a cab, a driver to pick me up and take me away from this place, a cab driver stops in front of me and my friend and asks, "hey, where are y'all going?" We say, "To Baton Rouge, will you take us there PLEASE?" The driver calls his dispatcher and asks, "Hey, how's the traffic going to Baton Rouge, Louisiana?" The dispatcher says, "It's bumper to bumper traffic, baby." He puts down his radio receiver and looks at us with guilt and worry in his eyes. He says, "Sure, I will take y'all!" We say, "OK, thank you. Our bags and the rest of our friends are outside that building," and we point. "Can you follow us to pick them up?" "Sure," he says. I run, run*

*like I'm running to pick up a bag of one million dollars and someone is trying to pick it up before me. As I run the wind blows in my hair; my legs move faster and faster; my high heels are coming off my feet.*

*—Latoya Wright*

*Through the years I tried to ride out the storm. Katrina was the worst I ever saw. Nights without sleep, I sat and looked at the stars. It was hot, no food, no water. How can we survive? But I did. I stayed until Thursday. —Van Le*

*My back ached from leaning on my suitcase all night long and I was cold. I didn't have much to cover myself with except a baby blanket I had brought along. The storm was just starting and the hall advisors told everyone to move to the fifth floor and sleep in the hall. Those who were lucky had dragged their mattresses all the way from their rooms to the hall. At that point I didn't know what was going to happen; all I could do was wait. Sleeping was far from my mind, so I sat there and listened to the wind and the rain outside. Finding a spot on the floor; I stretched out my legs and lay down. The floor was cold and hard and my ribs started to hurt; my hands became my pillow.*

*—Ismaelite Saint Felix*

*At about 9:00 Thursday morning, the US Coast Guard came to rescue the remaining students, faculty, and staff of Xavier University. After being ordered to gather a few more clothing items and valuables, the students were loaded onto boats and taken to the I-10. The drive out of New Orleans was torture. The students were told to hold their heads between their legs because police officers were afraid that New Orleans residents with no transportation would become jealous and start firing at the buses. The ride on the bus was said to be about 12 excruciating hours. —Devonte Williford*

*"Please don't leave him, and make sure he's OK," a mother of a friend told me over the phone. I agreed to because I was a good-hearted*

*person and I didn't want to leave him behind. I didn't want to leave anyone behind. But he wasn't the only one. Two of my girlfriends had also stayed and with them having such close ties to their families I knew it wasn't going to be easy for them to get through it. We played some games and did everything possible that didn't involve going outside or on the first floor. When times got rough and they couldn't stand it anymore, the girls started crying. I kept my faith alive and told them to do the same because they never knew who would be here to save us, but that there would be someone. —Elisha Johnson*

When I evacuated in the middle of the night, I never dreamed that I wouldn't be back in three days time. Never. But three days grew to three weeks and then four before I was lucky enough to come home. Before that time came I found myself in a dark, rented apartment, sitting at the kitchen counter, staring out a window that opened to a view of a red brick wall that was a mere foot or so away, writing an essay for a publication interested in knowing what happens to writers after disaster strikes. I read to my students:

I was busy pacing around my third "home" in two weeks time – a furnished apartment in my ex-husband's hometown—trying to figure out where I had put things. I had to make a series of phone calls to get the gas turned on, the cable connected.

I had to wash my laundry in the sink. When I was finished hanging clothes in the shower to dry, I had to apply for food stamps and FEMA assistance. I had to dash to the local newspaper office that was letting me check my email at lunch time. If that wasn't enough time (and it never was) I'd run over to the library and wait my turn for a 30 minute allotment. By then it was time to drive through a maze of small towns and ripe fields to pick up my kids from a school so different from the one back home.

Like my own children, many of the students found themselves in different schools while Xavier's campus was closed. They wrote:

*After the whole hurricane thing, I set off to live in this place where I would be known for my situation. "Aww, she just came from Katrina. She needs assistance in coping with the stress and psych damage she's endured." That was how the administrators would introduce me to everyone. They made me feel worse about my whole situation than I already did. —Elisha Johnson*

Some found that the hurricane had damaged more than the landscape.

*When I left the city in August, I never imagined that I would be leaving behind my happy life with my boyfriend, but about a month and a half after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Ryan and I broke up. My life then changed drastically. I almost went into a state of depression because it was the first time that someone had ever broken my heart. The stress of changing schools during his first semester of college, losing everything to the flood and fire that burned down his home and not being able to see me was too overwhelming for him, even though he forgot to remember that I was going through a tough time, too. —LaShundra Hooker*

When I came back to New Orleans, I had no job. I took a job as a Damage Assessor and as such I walked the wounded streets, measuring water lines and making note of damages. I took pictures of crumpled homes, toppled trees, toys dangling from slack electric lines, and thousands of ruined, discarded refrigerators that had been pulled to the curb and marked with messages of hope, humor or horror. I showed the pictures to my students and in their journals they described what they saw when they came back.

*The first sign of destruction I witnessed was a billboard ripped apart, hanging over the ground. The only thing that could have stopped that thing from falling was God's graces. Over in the Holly Grove area there*

were houses torn apart, but what made this area different was that one house appeared to have been moved from its foundation and relocated to the street. What made this sight even more startling was there were toys and clothing that seemed to belong to a child thrown around in every direction. This is when I realized the storm had spared no one. No man, woman or child could escape. —Darren Wallace

The first time I saw my parents' house, it looked like a haunted house; all of the windows upstairs and downstairs were broken up and the glass was in pieces. The second thing I saw was the inside of my parents' house. It looked like a bunch of monsters had had a quick party. —Hoa Tran

It was so hard to cross the Mississippi border, crossing into Louisiana, seeing trees thrown across highways, on top of houses and cars. Houses in the middle of streets, peoples' prized possessions thrown all across the sidewalks and streets. I sat in the car, staring at the devastated area, going into my subdivision. It was so horrible and I felt so torn up seeing that. My mom had just put the last down payment on a house that was built from the ground up. She had worked her whole life to get something she could call her own. As we approached our subdivision, I tried so hard to swallow a big knot in my throat and fight back the tears that were burning my eyes. My hands started shaking and my knees started knocking as we turned the corner to our house. As we pulled up in front of the door, what I saw was almost the worst thing I had ever seen. There were trees all over my yard and a big one that went right through my roof. I sat in the car for about five minutes and cried my eyes out. I had to put bags over my shoes because there was about two inches of mud inside my house. There were waterlines showing where the water had sat for a week or two. My dad measured it and it was almost five feet of water. All of our brand new couches, TVs, family pictures and important papers and materials were covered with mud and dripping wet. At that point I tried to put everything in God's hands. —Shavayza Fortson



*Weeks passed and finally Melanie and her family drove back into New Orleans to see their house. The scene was unexplainable. She was terrified when she realized that the place that she grew up in was gone and that things would never be the same. Melanie felt her eyes well up when they pulled into the driveway. Her car was completely ruined – the windows were gone and swamp mud and grass covered her seats. The house looked like a jungle – there were mud and tree branches everywhere. Melanie felt as if she were in a dream, but as she stepped into the house, she knew it was no hallucination. The kitchen tiles were black, the wood panel floors were ripped up from the ground, and a repulsive smell overpowered the house. Her room had been looted and clothes were all over the place. –Huong Pham*

We were all still in shock, but those who had lost their homes had it harder than others. Some students wrote of the realities of life in post-K New Orleans.

Living in a trailer was not the life for me. I was used to watching cable television and having privacy. I didn't have privacy because my mom could hear me throughout the trailer. Every morning, some men from FEMA came knocking on the trailer to let us know they were going to put steps on the trailer. Although we wanted steps, we couldn't get them just yet because the trailer we were staying in was for my mom's friend. We were still waiting for my mom's trailer to come and then we would push my mom's trailer back so we would have enough space for our trailer in the back yard. –Sabrina Moore

*I am a native of New Orleans and as my family and I were removing our things from our completely devastated house, a tour bus passed by and I felt like an animal in a zoo. I felt that someone had taken my pain and was using it to earn money. Joyce Gibbs, my former neighbor who was also gathering her belongings, added, "As I watched the bus pass, I no longer felt like a human being. I felt as if I was a part of a circus, a freak show, even." –Patrick Dupart*

They wrote about Katrina from any angle imaginable because I had asked them to, because I felt it was important that they do so. But after a while, a very real darkness began to invade the class.

*Dark days and even darker nights defined the city. Great monuments and awe-inspiring sights were now reduced to nothingness. Though the statues and monuments still stand, they represent something much greater now. Places that were once filled with vibrant life leave nothing behind but a great memory. —Darren Wallace*

How much could I take? How much could they? All of their teachers, I learned, had had the same bright idea to “teach Katrina” that semester and the students had grown sick of, and over, the subject. And when I read, over and over, the accounts of what the on-campus students had lived through and what the local ones had lost, I wondered if I had become their voyeur. Had they gotten the point of the assignment? Or were they simply being beaten down in this constant revisiting of hell?

At the moment that I had come to doubt the value of the semester’s work, I picked up a student’s portfolio and read:

Before Hurricane Katrina, I lost that fire inside me that keeps me going because I had nothing to write about. I had lost my ability to express with words. I did not have anything to read that would make me want to become better than what I am; I had lost my ambition for life. I felt that because I had lost my ambitions my life didn’t matter. I was living life with no purpose.

When Hurricane Katrina came, it was at that moment that I knew that my life would change. I knew that I had to appreciate life and experience as much as I can because I do not know when those blissful moments will end. I knew from that moment on I would have something to write about. Since I knew I would have something to write about, my determination came back and I felt like I had a purpose. My life is meaningful. —Shaakira Horbrook

Shaakira realized that her life was meaningful. In reading her words, I grew hopeful that the time spent reliving the ordeal in order to preserve the experience in all its shades of horror and despair had been time spent meaningfully, as well. A portion of this essay appeared as part of an article in *Poets & Writers Magazine*. Two other passages come from an essay that will appear in *Crossroads: The Journal of Southern Culture* (Mercer University Press) this fall.