

Sisters tell of escape from Hurricane Katrina

by Earliisa Granger

Olivia Rochon, 20, and her sister, Laura, 17, were late for class. Not because they are irresponsible, but because like many displaced students at Gulf Coast universities, they had to find a place to continue their education in a matter of days after Hurricane Katrina struck.

"We were really nervous when we first got [to State College], but the people are really nice," said Olivia, who was supposed to enter her senior year at Loyola University in New Orleans. Laura was beginning her first year at Loyola.

They are two of 25 students who decided to come to Penn State after learning their Gulf Coast university would not open again until the spring semester.

"My sister was considering Penn State or University of Kansas," Laura said. "We ended up deciding on Penn State because it's closer to my parents," who are now in Washington, D.C. in the aftermath of Katrina.

"Part of the missing is knowing it's not going to be the same. I'm never going to forget how it was."

--Laura Rochon

The Rochon family did not expect the hurricane to be that serious, Olivia said, so they decided to stay in New Orleans and take refuge in The Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Canal Street.

"It hit on that Monday morning, but we didn't see anyone on duty," Laura said. "Tuesday the floodwaters came, and then came the looters. We saw police and retired cops but didn't see FEMA until Wednesday."

Once the water started to rise, they were stuck in the hotel without power, food and water in what the New Orleans natives said were movie-like surroundings.

"Looters started shooting each other because they got so greedy," said Olivia. "The cops became as bad as the people. The only people that could salvage the situation

were the National Guard."

"A lot of the people that were looting are the people that lost everything," Laura said. "It's almost like they have nothing to lose."

Hearing rumors that there were buses to take people out of New Orleans and that the sick and women and children could go first, the girls' mother, younger sister and niece went to the corner in search of a way out of the city. They soon realized that there were no buses and decided to return to the hotel for their father and sister.

When they arrived at the hotel, a policeman threatened to shoot them. Terrified, they hid behind a nearby SUV. They yelled to a man in the hotel window to get their father. Reunited but now on the street, the family trekked through the water to their

house and left the city in an old truck that relied on "as much prayers as it did gas," Olivia said.

They drove to Atlanta and from there took a train to Washington, D.C. The sisters then bused it to State College. The rest of the family stayed in Washington, D.C.

The sisters said the ordeal still seems surreal.

"It's really hard to think about the week that I was there, and I wasn't even in one of the worst places," Laura said. "My family was fortunate enough to be able to avoid the convention center."

The sisters said that their birthplace was more than Mardi Gras, JazzFest, Bourbon Street and a party town for tourists. Olivia said she misses the little things like riding the streetcar down St. Charles Avenue or eating beignets at Café Du Monde.

"I used to talk a lot of trash about New Orleans, but now I miss it so much," Laura said. "Part of the missing is knowing it's not going to be the same. I'm never going to forget how it was."

Ways to Help Hurricane Katrina Survivors

PSU Pasquerilla Center is a drop-off location for donations. Products to donate: canned goods, water, air mattresses, coolers, blankets, pillows, baby formula, diapers, plywood, battery-operated flashlights and personal fans.

Contact the American Red Cross at 1-800-HELP-NOW or www.redcross.org about receiving disaster training or making a monetary contribution.

Albright-Bethune United Methodist Church is accepting monetary contributions for "local Katrina assistance." The church is located on the corner of West College Avenue and South Burrowes Road.

CrickFest 2005



Photo by Susan Haney

Phyllis Austin of Woodward wades in water at last month's CrickFest. The environmentally-friendly festival is held every year at Penns Creek, near Coburn, Pa.

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