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## Hurricane Katrina Evacuation Story

Hello. This is Mr. Michael J. Beninate. This is my evacuation story.

My mother had died in July 2003 and it was time for me to make a change. Since I didn't need to care for her anymore I put the house up for sale in late 2004 and sold it in July 2005, one and a half months before Katrina came.

I was a very fortunate person at the time Hurricane Katrina came to the New Orleans area. My home was to the west of New Orleans in the suburb of River Ridge. It just got high winds and some rain.

I was renting the house for two months until I could make my move. Katrina put a damper on my plans. Many of my possessions were packed in boxes stacked in the den.

Friday August 26, 2005. The skies were still clear and sunny. It was three days before the storm was expected to arrive when I began preparing to evacuate. I began the slow process of moving the boxes into the attic of the one story house. I have several herniated discs in my back and it goes out often. I intended to stack the furniture on top of tables. The preferred items would go on top.

My dog Minni (the mini dachshund) needed to come with me during the evacuation so I had to go out and buy a pet carrier. My suitcases were old and the latches probably would break during the trip so I bought two very large gym bags to hold my prized possessions. I also bought plastic drop cloths to cover the sixty-five boxes in the house.

Had I been traveling in a car the old suit cases would have worked, but; I was taking my motor scooter. It was the only working motor vehicle I owned. My car was old and needed a new engine. I just left it in the driveway because it gave the appearance that someone was always home.

While out shopping for food and supplies on August 27 I put fuel in the tank and filled a one and a half gallon spare fuel tank too. My scooter usually got 63 miles per gallon (mpg) so the fuel tank and the spare container would take me 283 miles, but; the scooter would now be traveling with a huge load that was not as aerodynamic. The extra fuel seemed to be a good idea because with so many people traveling on the road at once, gas stations could run out, and I didn't like the idea of being stranded.

The skies were now overcast with stronger winds.

I didn't finish packing my sixty-five boxes into the attic until the morning of my evacuation. Even on the morning of August 28, 2005 I didn't know if I would be leaving. By noon I knew it was time to go.

It was difficult to decide which items to take with me. There wouldn't be very much room in the gym bags and saddle bags.

I knew I needed several days of clothing and food with bowls for Minni and cups and utensils for me. We also needed water for a day. After they were packed it was time to get other valuables.

Insurance information along with other important documents, jewelry from my mother's collection, and many photographs were packed. There were a few curios from my mother's collection that I had always intended to keep and I brought them along too.

Believe it or not I took my whole desktop computer system with me in one of the large bags. Nothing on it was backed up to discs and there wasn't time to dump twenty-five gigabytes of data onto CDs.

What else did I want to take? My new Xootr. It is a top of the line push scooter big enough for adults. It was too cool to leave behind. I brought a spare motorcycle helmet too. There was the original preproduction copy of the book I wrote "How to Be Debt Free Fast!" and I needed to have that along with some other notebooks full of research and personal data.

I took two musical instruments with me, a student clarinet and a harmonica. The other instruments were too big to bring.

Since I'm a fairly conservative person it seemed prudent to take some tools along in case they were needed to repair the scooter. I even included an air pump.

I packed my pistol. Just in case.

So that was it. There didn't seem to be much more room on the scooter. The items weren't packed on the scooter but all of the bags were filled and I knew how they would fit.

Though I had not slept more than three hours the night before (due to packing and moving things into the attic) I didn't feel nervous or very upset at the prospect of losing most of what I owned. I mostly felt annoyed at the big inconvenience this was causing me.

If everything left behind would have been destroyed it would not have really affected my life. In a way this was an interesting revelation to me. It showed me that the essence that is me isn't really tied to physical things.

Considering that my prized guitars and a gorgeous fifty-five year old custom made Mason & Hamlin piano were about to be lost it was a real revelation.

None of the items left in the house were insured.



Sunday August 28, 2005. The local news stations reported that the interstate highways would be closed at 4:00 PM and that no more traffic would be allowed on the highways.

With the packing finished. I took Minni for a walk around our neighborhood for what might be the last time. I had decided that if the neighborhood was destroyed I wouldn't even come back. I would just continue to my next destination in life which was Helena Montana. I chose that location more than a month prior to the hurricane. It would be really different from New Orleans.

The skies were overcast with stronger gusting winds between five and twenty miles per hour. It seemed that I was the only person in the neighborhood that hadn't left. There were some cars still parked in a few driveways but I knew that each of those houses normally had more cars.

I brought Minni home and made some sandwiches for our journey.

I put the scooter outside by the front door facing the street and began loading the bags and fastening all of the items together with bungee cords. This scooter was packed with all of the valuables and necessary items I could fit. It wasn't over its weight limit. It was just overloaded with bulky items.

Three PM, it was time to go. I walked around the house and took in the view to try to remember it all.

I looked at the back yard and then locked the doors to the patio and garage. I put on my riding gear, put Minni in her pet carrier and stepped outside the front door and locked it. That moment really stuck in my mind. It just might be the last time I touch this house where I grew up.

I placed Minni on the seat of the scooter and walked away from it to take a photo. I wanted to remember this. It was kind of cool seeing so much stuff stacked on this scooter.



We were probably the last to leave. The street is empty.

I got on the scooter and attached the pet carrier to me by three different straps going around my neck.

If one failed there would be two more holding it to me. The carrier with Minni inside was resting on top of my legs. This way I could open the top of the carrier every once in a while to let Minni see me.

We left forty-five minutes before the roads were closed. In fifteen minutes we were on I-10 headed west.

There was quite a bit of traffic on the highway. It was crawling. This was not too easy for me. The scooter was much heavier than usual and more difficult to maneuver. Usually I ride the scooter between lanes in traffic, but it was too dangerous with all of this cargo to make such a move.

All of the traffic halted less than a mile into my trip on I-10. I waited forty-five minutes parked in traffic when rain started. I hopped off the scooter on the side of the road and put on my rain suit. Unfortunately for me I got a bit wet before I got the suit on.

Just before traffic began moving I saw a helicopter lifting off of the distant highway in front of me. It must have been on the road. I didn't see any wrecked cars or debris when I got to where it was so I don't really know why it stopped traffic for so long.

Once we got moving, the speeds were between five and thirty mph. The lane to my left would move and then stop. My lane would move and then stop. This went on for a long time.

Many people were taking pictures of me. It seemed that I was the only person evacuating on two wheels. Occasionally I would open Minni's carrier and let her poke her head out. That is when the cameras would really come out.

The speeds started to get close to the speed limit near the I-10 I-55 junction where I intended to go north.

The rain that was coming down had caused a problem for me. It was getting into my right boot. My rain suit usually kept me dry. Unfortunately for me when I put it on the bottom cuff wasn't all the way to my ankle. It was hooked on the top of my waterproof boot letting the water drain into it. Since the boot was waterproof it was accumulating water. The scooter was too heavy and the bags hanging from the handle bars were blocking my access to my boot. I couldn't do anything about it without stopping.

Stopping on the now fast moving highway would be more dangerous than letting my foot get soaked, so I let it continue. Even if I did stop to empty it, the heavy rain would just soak any dry sock before I could put it on.

After turning north the traffic speed got up to seventy mph and a little higher. I suppose everybody was tired of just sitting parked on the highway for so long that they decided to speed up.

The winds that were at my back were now crosswinds. That made it dangerous for me. Those winds were constant at twenty and gusting to forty mph. I've handled crosswinds many times and in truth it is kind-of fun to ride in a straight line with the scooter leaning to one side. With a huge load on the bike it was really scary.

Had the winds been constant it would not have been a problem. It was the gusting that caused the dangerous situation because it would keep pushing me towards the other lanes. I would compensate and then the wind would let up causing me to quickly drift the other way.

The winds were strong because I was on I-55 passing over Lake Pontchartrain thirty feet above the water. There is a very high overpass at Manchac (man-shack). It is over 100 feet higher than the water. I was worried about passing over that section. Fortunately the winds were in a lull for the thirty seconds it took to cross it.

When the road turned northwest away from the lake the winds were slower and less dangerous.

It was about 8:00 PM when I reached Hammond Louisiana. It took over four hours to travel sixty miles.

The scooter fuel tank had fuel but I stopped and put some in it anyway. I used my spare fuel container to

do it. I figured it would take me far enough away to another fuel station where I could replenish it. It was faster than waiting in line.

I walked Minni around the small strip of grass at a convenience store that was swamped with vehicles and other people. It was dark and raining. All of us were trying to just do our own thing. We all had a dazed look on our faces, kind of numb. We were all facing uncertainty together.

There was a long line for the restrooms. I waited in line with Minni's carrier around my neck and my saddle bags by my side. I wanted to change out of my wet pants and socks. I got into the rest room in about ten minutes. It would have been sooner but women kept cutting in line and going into the mens room. Somehow the other people thought it was OK or they were too cowardly to speak up. I spoke up and prevented a couple of people from cutting in front of me a couple of times when I was near the front of the line.

People would say that they really had to go, or that their child needed to go. I would just look at them and say "What do you think all of these people in line are waiting for? They need to go just as bad."

One got mad and I just stood my ground and he got the message.

When I got inside the room I changed and felt better.

Outside I took Minni out of her carrier one more time to let her walk around. When she was done we shared a peanut butter sandwich and moved on.

Our stop was about thirty minutes long.

The traffic just before Hammond and after it slowed down to forty-five mph. The closer we got to the Mississippi border the slower it got. It was stop and go for a long time. My destination was Jackson.

Just after the border I stopped at the first rest area. I considered staying the night but it wasn't allowed. We stayed there for about an hour. I ate a can of beans and gave Minni some of her dry dog food in a bowl. It took a while for me to get her to eat. I had to feed each piece to her individually.





This is around midnight at the rest area in Mississippi.

While hanging around and checking the maps on the wall I talked with a few different people. Most people had places to stay for a few days. They all seemed to have relatives that were taking them in. The place was packed with cars and trucks. We were the only ones on two wheels. There was still no sign of other motorcyclists.

It was midnight when I noticed that there was no more traffic on the highway. I mean zero traffic. It seems that all of the cars had passed my location and there were no more coming.



When Minni and I got rolling again it was easy cruising.

When I reached Jackson at 1:30 AM all of the hotels and motels were full. There was no place for us to go. I was very tired and wanted to take a break.

Knowing that I needed to continue onward to avoid the storm I decided that I needed to go westward.

All storms that come ashore move eastward once they get inland. I wanted to avoid being in the damage zone so I took I-20 westward for a few miles to Clinton. Fortunately I decided to get some fuel there. I stopped at a large Exxon station that had only one other patron and one cashier. Me and the other guy were the only ones on the road.

I walked Minni for a while and then filled the tank and my spare fuel canister. I calculated my fuel mileage and it was the lowest it had ever been, only 47 miles per gallon (mpg).

I spoke with the attendant for a while and asked if she knew of any places to just rest for a while. She said that a man from a church shelter had come in earlier and given her a telephone number that people could call to get directions to it.

I got some quarters from her and tried the pay phone. It was broken. She let me use the stores phone.

Indeed there was someone there that answered the call. He gave me directions to Morrison Heights Baptist Church and I was off to get some rest.

It was not too many miles away. When I arrived I saw many cars in the parking lot. I went to the gymnasium in the back and met the man in charge (sorry to have forgotten his name). I walked in the dark room and saw many cots set up with people sleeping.

We whispered to each other as we walked outside to talk. I wanted to bring my dog inside but he said it wasn't allowed due to health regulations. There were several animal crates stacked two high along the outside wall. There was a light rain beginning and I told him that the regulation didn't make any sense to me. It didn't matter.

I decided that if I couldn't bring my dog inside then I wasn't staying. I asked him if there was a sheltered spot around the grounds where I could sleep outside with my dog. He said there was a covered walkway in the front of the church and I could stay there. That is where I went.

I moved my scooter under the walkway and put Minni in her carrier against the wall. I opened one of my bags and pulled out some food and one of the plastic drop cloths that I took along to line the bags. Minni and I ate, had a walk, had a drink of water and got comfortable laying on the concrete walkway. I

changed out of my boots and into running shoes before falling asleep.

It was a good rest.

August 29, 2005. In the morning I got some food from the bountiful breakfast that the church parishioners had set up for all of the evacuees. (I kept Minni very close by.) They were very hospitable people doing this for the people that needed help. They weren't just talking the talk, they were walking the walk regarding helping their fellow man.

I went back to my scooter and sat by the wall with Minni while eating. I kept myself covered with the drop cloth because the winds were just starting to blow. We were 180 miles away from the coast and the storm was another day from coming inland this far.

While sitting outside resting I saw a lady pull up in a Cadillac Seville near the end of the building. She glanced at me as she walked around the corner on her way to the gymnasium. She returned with a couple of young men who helped her unload some boxes of food from the trunk of her car.

After she was done with that she walked over to me and told me that I was coming home with her. She really didn't ask, she was telling me. I asked her if she was sure that she wanted to do that because I had a dog. She was sure.

She heard what I had done the night before by refusing to leave my dog outside alone and wanted to help me out.

She went and got someone to help me unload my scooter and put my stuff in her car. We decided to leave the scooter parked at the church. In hindsight it probably would have been better for me to follow her with all of my stuff. She didn't want me to get lost while trying to follow her.

Her name was Mrs. Wolf. She and her husband owned Wolfs Vending in Clinton Mississippi. We talked along the way to her home about what I had gone through on my way to the Church. We talked about the storm too.

Fifteen minutes later we arrived at her pretty two story house in a beautiful neighborhood. I unloaded the car and brought my possessions to the second floor where there was a very large bedroom that took up half of the upstairs of the large house.

I took Minni for a walk and then went inside to shower and shave. We talked for a while and then I went to have a nap. I slept from noon to about 4:00 PM.

During the rest of this day and the next, Hurricane Katrina was messing up the Gulf Coast. I didn't know what was happening to my property because there was no news coverage about it.

I stayed with the Wolfs for two nights and then had to leave. Mrs. Wolf's mother was to the east of Clinton. Her mother's home was in the path of the edge of Katrina and the wind had blown a tree onto her house. Mrs. Wolf told me that I needed to leave because her mother had to come and stay in the room I was using. She was very nervous and upset about her mother's situation.

I quickly arranged to rent a small car (got the last one in town) because I didn't want to ride the scooter fully loaded for a few hundred more miles to Memphis Tennessee. Memphis was the closest place that had available hotel rooms.

Once I got the car from Enterprise Rent-a-Car, which wouldn't deliver it, I went to the church and checked on my scooter. While there I gave them a \$100.00 donation for helping me and the other people. The Wolfs wouldn't accept any money for feeding and sheltering me and Minni. They wouldn't even let me pay for dinner when we went out.

Mr. Wolf and I made arrangements for my scooter to be moved to his warehouse and for an important document I was expecting to be mailed to their house. They would hold the document and my scooter until I returned.

I said goodbye and hit the road to Memphis. Traveling by car was so much easier for Minni. I'm glad I did it. The rental agreement was open ended

due to this situation. I paid for two weeks in advance.

It took all day to get to Memphis and find a hotel. During my trip I decided to stay at only Motel 6 locations because they are pet friendly. We had a good sleep there.



Here is Minni on the bed in a comfortable Motel 6.

I really had no place to go and could have just stayed in Memphis.

So I got to thinking, since it didn't matter where I stayed for a week or more, I decided to go to Hendersonville, which is a suburb of Nashville. My

mother was from Nashville and I had an aunt in law and cousins there. The next day I was off to the nearest Motel 6 that was close to Hendersonville.

The room at the Motel 6 in Nashville looked almost the same as the previous one. Minni and I tried some food from a chain restaurant that sells fish. It is good. This chain isn't in New Orleans.

That night I went through the phone book calling people trying to find my cousins. None of them were listed. Luckily a distant cousin was in the book and he directed me to the family I needed to find. Several hours later three families converged on my motel room and spent some time with me.

My cousin Mike Scudder (the patriarch of the family) wanted me to stay in his home during my time away from home. We arranged for his mother and her husband (Mikes stepfather) to visit me the next day and direct me to Mike's house.

Minni barked at everybody during the visit. For some reason Minni didn't like my cousin Mike. Perhaps he reached out to pet her and it scared her. I can't think of any other reason for it. While he was visiting he was leaning on one of the pillows on the bed. There weren't enough chairs in the room for everybody.

Minni decided to mark that pillow as her territory when Mike got up and peed on it. None of us saw her do it. She had never done such a thing in her life.

The next day at checkout time I offered to pay for the pillow. The manager said it didn't matter and for me to just put the pillow aside for the housekeeper to remove it.

Mike had a big house on one and a half acres. The room where I stayed was called a bonus room. That was a term not used in New Orleans. A bonus room is a room that has one or more entrances with or without doors. It can be used for an office or play room. Mike's bonus room was set up as a play room with a pool table and large screen TV and every conceivable bit of Tennessee Volunteers paraphernalia made. One wall was checkerboard orange and white.

The couch where I slept was very wide and comfortable for us. Mike got a table for me and I set up my computer. At night I connected to the internet when nobody was using the telephone. It was perfect for me. I usually go to sleep at around 5:00 AM and Mike and his wife Jan get up early in the morning for their jobs.

Minni and I hunkered down and just followed the news. Within a day of arriving in Hendersonville we all learned that I would be out of the city for at least three more weeks.

My entire Tennessee family took me in and cared for me and Minni. I got to visit all of my cousins and spend plenty of time with them. This was probably the best thing about the Katrina evacuation



experience. It allowed me to reconnect with relatives on my mother's side of the family.

Minni got a new friend too. It turns out that Mike had a mini dachshund named Tiny. Tiny was eight years old and a bit overweight. She liked to play but she couldn't keep up with two year old Minni. It took a while for Minni to get accustomed to interacting with another dog. She had only been with me since I got her. There were no other dogs for her to play with at home.



Minni and Tiny



Minni is trying to get Tiny to play.





Minni brought her ball onto the table.



Minni dropped her ball and Tiny got it.





Here is Tiny watching Minni play with a toy. Tiny really liked that toy so much that Mike bought one just like it for her.



Minni sleeping



The camera noise woke her.

During the month of September there were many people having birthdays. Here is a photo of my Tennessee family at one of the birthday parties. Mike is holding Tiny and I am holding Minni.





I listened to radio stations from New Orleans in the late evening on the AM band to get updates. I also used the internet to read the government web sites.

At about September 24<sup>th</sup> I said goodbye to everyone. Then I packed and went home in the rental car.





This is me and Minni just before leaving Tennessee. I had my cousin Jan photograph me in my rain suit

just to show how I looked in it. I took it off before getting into the car.

It took a long time to get home but it was done in just one day. Damage started to be visible in Mississippi near the Louisiana border. When I got past the bridges over Lake Pontchartrain and onto land along I-10 it was clear to see that there was a hurricane here. Roofs were missing tiles, power lines were leaning, and many street lights were out. There were leaves and other debris everywhere. When I got off I-10 and onto the city streets most traffic lights were out. Every store sign was damaged.

I got to my street and it was messy too, but there had been no flooding. My former house was missing roof tiles and two trees had been damaged. One of them fell between the house and the next door neighbor's house. It poked a small hole in the roof. The new owners had cleared the trees and entered the property to check it out days before I arrived. The house reeked of mold.

The electricity worked but the gas water heater didn't work. The water system in my area was not affected by the storm so my sewage system worked too. We were in good shape.





Before Hurricane Katrina and then afterwards













This is after the new owners had removed debris from the fallen trees.

I immediately began bringing my boxes out of the attic and packing the other items that couldn't be packed before the storm.

Piano movers were contacted to remove my piano and put it into storage.

The new owners wanted to double my rent because they had borrowed money at a very high interest rate. They had planned to flip the house after doing some refurbishing and adding a room where the patio was. The hurricane put a kink in their plans.

I refused to pay double the rent for a house with no hot running water and that was reeking of the smell of mold. One of the new owners acquiesced and kept the rent at the previously agreed upon price.

There was a new very big problem for me and many other people. We couldn't get any rental moving trucks or professional moving trucks to come into southern Louisiana. How was I going to move?

I had waited in line at a U-haul location for an hour before they opened to get a truck. They informed all of us that their company would not be sending any new trucks into town for an unknown amount of time. There were no trucks anywhere in the Gulf Coast available. Interstate 10 was destroyed to the east of New Orleans and nothing could come from that direction.

My cousin Mike Scudder in Tennessee had said that if I needed any help that he would come down with me. I hadn't anticipated needing him and told him to stay in Tennessee. Well, now I needed him.

I got on the telephone to U-haul in Hendersonville and ordered their biggest truck. Mike then brought it to me in a couple of days.



He helped me to load the truck with as much as it would hold. It wasn't big enough to take all of my things so I had to leave one set of bedroom furniture and almost everything in my garage with the exceptions of the washer, dryer, and lawn mower. I couldn't find our set of silver utensils. The new owner probably kept them.

I signed the title of the old car over to the new owners too. Goodwill wanted it but there were no people operating in the area yet. I packed the car full to the roof of my mother's clothes, shoes, bedding, and crochet supplies. I don't know if the new owners gave the car and its contents to the Goodwill store as I had intended.



On October 2, 2005 I thanked my cousin Mike again and paid him for the fuel he put into the truck. I gave him the keys to the rental car and let him take it back to Tennessee. We wanted to look around the town before he left but the police were still keeping New Orleans closed to non-residents.

On October 3, 2005 I completed packing the truck. One of the owners came by and I told him where the keys to the house and the car would be left. It was really strange to be leaving the state without being able to visit friends or relatives. Even most of the neighbors weren't around.

I started the giant truck and headed to Clinton Mississippi to pick up my scooter and important documents at about 4:00 PM.

At a gas station I met a couple of families that were also packed up and leaving Louisiana for good. It just wasn't worth the trouble to stay in a destroyed city.

We got to Clinton that evening and picked up the scooter. Mr. Wolf had my important papers and my scooter at his home. He helped me load it on the truck and tie it down. Mrs. Wolf loaded me up with a bunch of snacks from their companies vending company. We talked for a while. Mr. Wolf noticed my brand new punching bag and mentioned he studied martial arts. I gave it to him in appreciation for all of

his help. It was the best I could do because he wouldn't accept money.

Minni and I got back in the truck and found the nearest Motel 6 for the night. From the next day on every day was an adventure. We were traveling into territory we had not seen before.

I got to see the plains states of Kansas and Oklahoma. They smelled wonderful. Colorado seemed to be a big farm state too. I had previously thought of it only as a mountain state.

The view of Denver from the interstate highway is just about the ugliest place I've ever seen. It doesn't match the beautiful scenery in movies and brochures.

Wyoming was gorgeous. Had I not already had plans to live in Helena Montana I might have stayed there. It was the first place where snow was on the ground on the mountain tops and along the sides of the road near the border. It made me nervous. As a lifetime resident of Louisiana I had zero experience driving on snow.

I entered Montana and it was just as beautiful as Wyoming with the exception that there were more mountains along the interstate highway. For the previous two days I had to wear a jacket because it was getting colder the farther we went north.

While climbing a pass in Bozeman I experienced driving in snow for the first time. I don't recommend driving in snow for the first time while operating a thirty-six foot long fully loaded truck on a twisty mountain highway at speeds over fifty mph. I was nervous.

On the other side of the mountain the snow stopped falling. I relaxed just a little.

It took us six days to drive 2400 miles. I found the Motel 6 in Helena and began our search for a home. I had been on the telephone nightly with different people in the town throughout our trip arranging appointments to locate a house to rent. It took about four days to find something that was suitable. It wasn't ideal but I had to take it.

U-haul was threatening to have me arrested. Why? They didn't want to extend the rental agreement for the truck. Even though I had already paid for the initial trip and a couple of extra days they wanted me to empty the truck and turn it in. It didn't matter to them that I had no where to live yet.

It didn't make sense. Why would a company that was getting \$165.00 guaranteed payment per extra day in advance want me to turn in the truck? Jerks.

Now I live in East Helena Montana in a beautiful valley. No more hurricanes for me.

Maybe I'll visit New Orleans again one day, but there is no hurry to do so.



Me on top of Mt. Helena in October 2007 (with a bad hair cut)

Visit my anti-ageing blog with the patented epithelial cell cancer drug. Read the many testimonials about how people's lives were saved. It also helps over 30 other disease conditions.

<http://donotdieyet.blogspot.com>

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