

SOCIETY

## Durham Katrina survivors recall their experiences

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Victoria Olsen and Dale Bellard fled New Orleans after Katrina hit

DURHAM (WTVD) -- When arriving at Victoria Olsen's Durham home, the scents of Cajun cooking immediately came wafting from her kitchen. It was the product her longtime friend and roommate, Dale Bellard, baking a pork loin in the oven, stuffed with whole garlic cloves and onions.



Together the pair fled the home they shared in Mississippi after it was destroyed during Hurricane Katrina.

"It had been taken off its foundation, because most of the houses there are on blocks," she explained. "It had been taken off of that. And all of the ceilings were just in shreds hanging down, everything from upstairs in the attic was downstairs, it was just a mess."

A picture of their home in Mississippi

Now, 10 years after the storm, Olsen still remembers in vivid detail riding out the hurricane and the accompanying tornadoes that struck her home.

"We had these trees that were 100 year old huge pecan trees. And the one that was right outside our window, we just watched it go straight up into the air. And then the fencing that we just put in, it was an acre of land, every piece of fencing was just like toothpicks

in the spiral going up in the air. And then the tree came crashing down to the swimming pool, which was right outside my bedroom door," she recalled.

Her son, a local policeman, actually drove to her house in the middle of the storm to bring her and Bellard to a safer location. While they did escape without serious injuries, their home was ruined.

That was just the start of the nightmares that followed. Olson, who has multiple sclerosis, suffered a severe flare-up immediately after the storm.

"Within two days of Katrina I had an exacerbation of my MS where I couldn't walk and it was like 105 degrees and of course there was no water, no plumbing, no electricity, no telephone, no TV," she said.

"You didn't even know what was happening. And you couldn't go on the roads."

Amazingly, a friend of Bellard's with a 4-wheel drive vehicle managed to get them out of town.

"He called a friend in Alabama on the cell phone that was the last charged cellphone on that we could find," he said. "And his friend had a big four-wheel-drive truck. And he drove over all of the rubble and we got in his truck and Dale drove me up here to get medical help because our hospitals were completely destroyed."

"My doctors there was no way to even contact my doctors because no one had phones or anything else."

Dale Bellard's cookbook and life story

They drove 12 hours to Durham, where her daughter was living and tried to get medical care here. But, because she was on Medicaid in Mississippi, she was unable to get medical coverage in North Carolina.

They were forced to make the long trek back to Mississippi to receive care in one of the already crowded to capacity hospitals there.

"He took me back to Mississippi and they treated me on the third floor of the hospital. The first two floors were completely washed away. And they had all these volunteer people coming in to help with people who had been hurt in Katrina. And I sat there with IVs in my arms, just surrounded by that."

Even after returning to Durham, it would take a year with 35 different insurance adjustors just to find out that her insurance would only give her 30 percent of what her home and her ruined possessions were worth.

As for funding from FEMA, that never came.

"It had turned out that an acquaintance of ours that we just knew because she cut my hair lived in Alabama. But she had reported to FEMA that she lived in our house to get the funding," Olsen explained.

She went into detail how that meant FEMA never gave her the assistance she needed despite proof she said she provided. She said it showed she was the homeowner and that woman never lived there.

She said this was just one example of people who used the devastation in that part of the country for scams.

A table they recovered from their home in Mississippi

Coupled with what she and others perceived as disorganization and a severe lacking in preparation at the local, state, and federal levels made for a long, arduous road to recovery for residents.

As a result, she and Bellard both decided to simply stay in Durham. In the past ten years, they've seen the birth of 9 grandkids between the two of them.

While there are things they both miss about the area, they said they have fond memories as well as Bellard's renowned Cajun cooking to give them a small taste of the place that they both considered home.

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