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## Mid-Hudson residents remember helping out after Katrina

**BYLINE:** By, Michael Woyton

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Leanne Ruth Lopez's first day of school was Thursday.

Five years ago, she began life far from her family's home in St. Bernard Parish, east of New Orleans. Leanne Ruth was born in Vassar Brothers Medical Center in the City of Poughkeepsie in October 2005.

Her mother, Brandi Lopez, was eight months' pregnant when she and husband, Scott, fled their home as Hurricane Katrina approached. They were among the thousands forced to evacuate the area in the face of one of the nation's most devastating natural disasters. In all, 1,833 people in five states died as a result of Katrina and the aftermath.

Brandi Lopez, who had no insurance, was treated at Vassar Brothers' Care Center. The hospital started a collection to help the couple.

"They (the doctors and staff) were really so compassionate," Lopez said. "I was overwhelmed with baby stuff, and whatever I couldn't take I gave away."

Though far from the devastation, the mid-Hudson Valley became a refuge to those in need and was the home of many who donated their time and talents to help in the recovery. Five years after Katrina, the scale of the destruction, depth of the need and courage of the survivors are still fresh in the memories of local people.

The Category 1 hurricane hit South Florida and moved into the Gulf on Aug. 26, 2005. Katrina strengthened to a Category 5 storm on Aug. 28, 2005, but struck southeast Louisiana and southwest Mississippi as a Category 3 storm the following day. Houses were flooded and streets washed away after the rivers swelled and levees broke.

Before the hurricane hit, Scott and Brandi Lopez loaded themselves and a few other members of their family, along with a few irreplaceable items, a cat named Panda Bear and dog named Chevy, into two vehicles and made their way across the country.

First, they went to Texas, but they did not find a warm welcome there. So, they moved on to the mid-Hudson Valley, where they had family. They moved back to Louisiana in January 2006, living in a trailer provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"It was awful, but it allowed us to come back," Lopez said.

She said life is generally better now. They are back in the home that had been severely damaged by Katrina.

"The parish is really coming back," Lopez said, but there are other areas that are still struggling.

Finding family

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LaGrangeville resident Rose Johnson used to live in St. Bernard Parish, and still has family there.

When Katrina hit, she had no idea where they were for eight days.

"We had cell phone numbers, but communication was bad," Johnson said.

She couldn't remember the name of the Town of Poughkeepsie police officer who escorted her to headquarters and got in touch with the local Louisiana police, who were then able to locate her family.

"A lot of good people did a lot of good things during that time," Johnson said.

Awe-inspiring

Town of Stanford Supervisor Virginia Stern spent about two weeks in Baton Rouge, La., after Katrina hit. Rita made landfall while she was down there.

She is a clinical social worker who does disaster mental health for the Dutchess County chapter of the American Red Cross.

"I was working in a shelter, talking to people who were stunned and trying to figure out how to cope," Stern said.

"Some had lost a little bit, and some had lost everything," she said.

Her focus was listening to people, hearing what their needs were and helping them find their own ground to stand on.

"It's important for them to know there is a stable community around them," Stern said, "so they can find their own stability."

She looks back at the people she met with admiration.

"The people became heroes in the fact that they kept on with their lives," Stern said. "As a volunteer coming down from a place that wasn't affected, it was just awe-inspiring."

Giving aid

Five students from SUNY New Paltz taking a disaster psychology course at the Institute for Disaster Mental Health went to New Orleans in late December 2005 to help deliver food and supplies.

Institute Director James Halpern was initially concerned the 20-year-olds might be overwhelmed.

"They were very well trained and well prepared, but they were young," he said, "and we were putting them in a difficult place."

Halpern was with them for a period of time and found them to be "amazing."

"They had energy and enthusiasm and idealism and a level of competence that was extraordinary," he said.

Ellenville resident Zak Joyce was one of the students. Today, he is a social worker who works with teenagers.

His first impression when he arrived in New Orleans was of the enormity of the disaster.

"The size of it couldn't be comprehended," Joyce said. "We would drive for miles and miles."

He said it was a life-changing experience for him.

"Katrina taught me how to love helping people," Joyce said.

Raising money

The mid-Hudson Valley opened its wallets and arms to find ways to help the people of the Gulf Coast region.

Throughout the area there were fundraising drives and concerts, and clothing and supplies were collected.

Ken Juras, student body president of Marist College at the time, said there was a host of events on campus.

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Juras, originally from Red Hook, and now living in Albany, said there were talent shows, donation drives, even a carwash that raised more than \$1,000 in one day.

"When horrible things happen, people are still willing to do what they can and take time out of their lives to help people they don't know," he said.

Lesson learned?

Hyde Park Police Officer Paul Caccia couldn't sit at home after Katrina occurred.

He and his brother-in-law Patsy Cicala loaded up a Ford F-150 pickup truck and a 22-foot recreational vehicle with water, clothes and other supplies in September 2005.

They drove to Monroe, La., donating the RV to a family and distributing supplies.

"You kind of wonder how those people made it through," he said.

"I hope we learned a lesson," Caccia said. "I hope we are a little bit more coordinated now. It certainly wasn't efficient the way things were handled."

Rebuilding

Town of Clinton resident Terry Temple has been to Biloxi, Miss., six times since Katrina, doing relief work.

The first thing she and other volunteers did was to gut people's houses.

"That was difficult," she said, "because you were bringing people's lives out to the street to be thrown away."

Temple said she has seen a lot of progress in the area.

"But the thing is, there is still a lot of work to be done," she said.

Vassar College senior Allison Good is from New Orleans and her family still lives there.

A lot of people and businesses have come to New Orleans to help rebuild, but it's far from over, she said.

"People still need to realize that New Orleans is worth rebuilding," she said. "People need to realize New Orleans is a great American city."

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