

The Zeta Psi Fraternity and Hurricane Katrina: An Oral History from Members of the Beta Tau Chapter

Will Woldenberg (BT '07)

A detailed history of the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Beta Tau Chapter at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA as recounted by eight undergraduate members of the Chapter in interviews with Brother Will Woldenberg (BT '07). The history begins prior to the hurricane's landfall in Louisiana on August 29th and concludes in the Spring of 2006.



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Contributors

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“With Idiotic Certainty”

In 2005, the gulf coast of the United States was decimated by a trio of hurricanes. Rita and Wilma came late in the season, dealing heavy blows to “Cajun Country”, the swampy rural areas of southwest and central Louisiana. But Katrina, a storm that would end up directly and indirectly taking the lives of approximately 1,836 Americans¹, hit the sweet spot on the border of Louisiana and Mississippi. Because of massive flooding, due to erroneous construction of the New Orleans levee system by the Army Corps of Engineers², more than 80 % of New Orleans was underwater in Katrina’s aftermath.³

The Beta Tau Chapter of the Zeta Psi Fraternity has been located in New Orleans since 1977. The fraternity brothers, many of whom attended Tulane University at the time of the storm, tell their stories below. The stories begin slightly before Katrina touched land early on Monday August 29⁴ and detail the experiences of evacuation, property loss and damage, physical and mental damage, and life-altering decisions.

Nick Zwolak

Looking back nearly ten years later, I really hadn’t thought about what effect Katrina was going to have on me. I probably just didn’t want to acknowledge the scale and magnitude of the damage and suffering in the city.

Eric Paulantonio

As I entered the city limits of New Orleans on I-10 by the cemeteries, I could smell the city. The rot. I could not see it. But I could smell it.

Alex Gecan

They don’t tell you that disaster relief is like catnip for military veterans. So you’re partly amused, partly annoyed when a former gunnery sergeant with three confirmed kills decides he’s going to try to run the Slidell volunteer shelter as he would the barracks.

Eventually, everyone figures out how to sleep through the lights going on at 7 a.m. Gunny and his wife, also a Marine, keep cooking breakfast every morning at 6, even though nobody eats it after the first week. They’re good cooks, but everyone would rather get another 90 minutes of sleep.

Eric Paulantonio

¹ “11 Facts About Hurricane Katrina,” DoSomething.org, <https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-hurricane-katrina>. Accessed on April 14, 2014.

² “Hurricane Katrina damage judgment against Army Corps of Engineers is reversed by federal appeals court,” NOLA.com (Times-Picayune). Published on Sept. 24, 2012. http://www.nola.com/katrina/index.ssf/2012/09/katrina_damage_judgement_again.html. Accessed on April 14, 2004

³ “EIGHT YEARS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA, MANY EVACUEES YET TO RETURN,” Al Jazeera America. Published on August 29, 2013. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/8/29/eight-years-afterkatrinalowincomeevacueeshaveyettoreturn.html>. Accessed on April 14, 2014.

⁴ “Special Report: Katrina Timeline,” Think Progress. Published on September 6, 2005. <http://thinkprogress.org/report/katrina-timeline/>

I had only evacuated because of a hurricane once. It was the first week of freshman year and I ended up going on a three day odyssey to evacuate home. I don't think the city lost power. After that I vowed to ride out hurricanes.

Shir Elany

I pledged as a freshmen in the Spring of 2005. That semester that brought my class together and bonded us. Obviously, we didn't know that the hurricane and Tulane's president would disperse us.

Nick Zwolak

I had just finished my senior year and was getting ready to complete the final year of the 4+1 Biomedical Engineering Master's program. I was living in small shotgun just east of campus with Eric Forsyth (**BT '07**) and a frisbee buddy.

Aaron Ronksley

I came back into town on Wednesday, August 24th to train to be a Freshmen Orientation Coordinator. We had training all day Thursday and Friday to prepare for Freshman move-in on Saturday, August 27th.

Alex Gecan

Dan Laiacona (**BT '03**) was sleeping on my sofa when I woke up.

That's the first thing I remember clearly of the 36 hours I spent in New Orleans in August 2005 before I found out I had to leave.

I left him snoring – some of us knew him as The Guy on the Couch – and went to meet friends for some daytime drinking.

I had lost weight, put on muscle and quit smoking. My hair was too long. For three months I had ridden a desk at The Village Voice, the first worthwhile internship in a spastic and terminally frustrating career. For some reason I had chosen that summer to drop some bad habits and pick up some better ones.

Most of that day and a half is hazy, the precision of memory dulled by nine years' intervention. I spent a great deal of it sleeping, still stiff from the 22-hour drive down from central Jersey in a classmate's Volkswagen Jetta. I'm sure I didn't do anything much more worthwhile the rest of the day.

And by the following morning, they would be telling us we would have to leave.

Nick Zwolak

When we heard the storm was approaching I didn't think too much of it, until it passed the Florida Keys.

Aaron Ronksley

My mother emailed something about a storm potentially hitting New Orleans but at Tulane, we weren't talking that much about it.

At some point on Saturday morning during move-in day, probably around 11am, the announcement was made that the Tulane President's Convocation was moved up to 1pm and that there would be something important.

Alex Gecan

Everything in the interim is now just images. A trip to the levee. Grocery shopping. Visiting friends. Dropping off Tara's Jetta after unloading my things.

I spent the morning and afternoon of Saturday the 27th fuming, angrily vowing to remain behind, knowing with idiotic certainty that everyone was just winding themselves up over nothing.

Nick Zwolak

(That Saturday), I took a lengthy bike ride down the Mississippi levee with every intention of staying in the city for the storm. I neglected to keep mind of the fact that I would have to turn around and ride back, so I ended up doing a 34 mile loop, which I was not used to. I stopped by the Zeta Psi house to check on the status and helped board up a couple of the front windows with Alex and then took an extra board for my back windows of my apartment.

Aaron Ronksley

At the time of Convocation, incoming freshmen were notified that everyone would have to evacuate Tulane and New Orleans. The announcement was made that everyone must evacuate campus by 6pm and buses would be going to Jackson State (Mississippi) for anyone who didn't have somewhere to go. I quickly headed over the fraternity house, where Dan Laiacona had purchased plywood to board up the house.

Alex Gecan

Dan and Adam Frey (**BT '06**), the first friend I'd made at school, prevailed in convincing me otherwise.

Nick Zwolak

Upon exiting the Zeta Psi house, we acknowledged that this wasn't going to be a normal storm. It's drilled into your head from the moment that you get to New Orleans that it can only handle a Category 3 Hurricane dead on. We remarked that this was going to be a serious Hurricane Pork Chop Sandwiches meaning "Get the F*ck outta here!"

Aaron Ronksley

I boarded up the house then decided to spray paint derogatory things about Hurricane Katrina on the plywood.



“Rent-by-the-hour motels”

Nick Zwolak

Upon taking stock of the situation, I didn't have great resources at my disposal. I couldn't travel far on the '91 Ford Probe that Matt Bradley (**BT '05**) gifted to me. Hell, I barely trusted it to get me to the grocery store and back.

Aaron Ronksley

We had a group of 6 people heading to Dallas but we had 4 cars. I volunteered to leave mine, and left it in the 3rd floor of the parking garage on campus.

Nick Zwolak

My ultimate plan would have been to stock up on supplies and should flooding occur, I was going to commandeer a canoe that was in the backyard of my friends' apartment backyard.

Aaron Ronksley

I was told later by a New Orleans police officer that I had picked the perfect spot.

Nick Zwolak

As luck would have it, a few of my ultimate frisbee teammates and friends were still in town and they called asking if I wanted a ride with them, which I gratefully and immediately accepted. I grabbed my hiking backpack, my tent and sleeping bag, three changes of clothes, all the booze in my house and some board games. The plan was to hit up Mammoth Caves National Park in Kentucky, ride out the storm there, and then come back to New Orleans.

Aaron Ronksley

I ended up riding with Greg Hayslett (**BT '07**). We had to pick up his brother's dogs since he was out of town so we drove two large dogs to Jackson, MS where Greg's sister-in-law's family lived. We initially planned to head to Dallas from Jackson that night but it was already midnight so we were convinced to spend the night in Jackson.

Nick Zwolak

We made it to the park late and decided to break out the board games and booze and played using our headlamps until the wee hours of the morning.

Alex Gecan

At 4 a.m. on Sunday the 28th, we dropped Dan off at the airport and drove west. Although contraflow was supposed to be in effect, the eastbound lanes on I-10 were vacant and the westbound lanes immobile (*Note – in order to increase the flow of traffic out of New Orleans, city officials had closed the major highways from entering the city and were using all available lanes for exiting motorists*⁵).

I-20 was more passable, but only slightly so.

⁵ “Evacuation scramble puts contraflow system to the test,” Ed Anderson, The Times Picayune. Published on August 29, 2005. <http://www.nola.com/katrina/pages/082905/A04.pdf>. Accessed on April 14, 2014

The idea was to go to Dallas. We had friends there, and we would be able to wait out the storm.

These things never lasted more than a few days – a week if they turned really bad.

So we arrived in Dallas, cranky but intact.

Aaron Ronksley

Greg dropped me off in Dallas at Will Stafford's (**BT '06**), where 10 or so fraternity brothers had ended up, and Greg went back to his family's house.

Nick Zwolak

We woke up that Sunday to the rain from the feeder bands of Katrina and enjoyed a tour in the caves from one of the national park rangers. We then had to relocate to covered areas of the visitor center so we played board games and drank until about 5 AM, when we discovered that the hotel on site of the National Park had a TV. We watched the coverage of the storm making landfall, and made a guess that school was going to be closed for at least a couple of days.

Shir Elany

I flew into New Orleans on Sunday August 28 with my family and a 37" flatscreen TV. When I landed, I listened to a voicemail on my cell asking me if I was actually going to New Orleans that day since (*New Orleans Mayor Ray*) Nagin had just declared a mandatory evacuation. My family and I quickly confirmed it on the airport televisions, and rushed from airline to airline trying to find outgoing tickets, after failing to do that we moved onto the car rental companies. The last one (we checked) had one car left so we took it.

Kevin Donahoe

My wife had evacuated to Baton Rouge with other essential Jefferson Parish personnel while I evacuated my mother and three cats to a Marshall, Texas motel. Mom accurately described the seedy-looking motel by saying "Kevin, this looks like one of those rent-by-the-hour motels on Airline Highway." But I had driven more than fourteen hours and wasn't that concerned with the cleanliness.

Eric Paulantonio

When I woke up that Sunday morning, the weather radar showed an angry red blob the size of the Gulf of Mexico slowly making its way right for us.

I quickly filled my pickup truck with as much as I could, loading the bed with contractor bags. Girlfriend, TV, and dog were loaded into the cab and we were on the road by 9AM.

I drove west on the east-bound side of I-10. Cars filled all lanes and even made a lane in the grass. It was sunny that day as the ominous dark outer cloud bands of Katrina were visible over our shoulder as we headed west.

We weren't in traffic that long as we weren't going to Houston but to Nacogdoches in northeast Texas. We holed up at a friend's house figuring we'd be there the night before heading back.

Alex Gecan

And by the next morning we knew we were fucked.

Aaron Ronksley

I had spent a few days having fun and then we all realized what had actually happened.

Eric Paulantonio

I remember a sickening anxious pit developing in my stomach as I watched water spill over the levees on TV. I had no flood insurance and wouldn't know the fate of my house for four weeks.

Nick Zwolak

Both the city and school were out of commission.

Shir Elany

Tulane gave a statement that the school would be closed until at least Friday.

Eric Paulantonio

We were glued to the TV as they tried to float a barge into one of the levee wall breaches. The current sucked the barge towards the breach and the barge demolished another few hundred feet of wall. Afterwards, the Mayor announced that the new plan was to let the water in the city come to level with the lake. We realized that this is not a plan, just physics. We also realized we would not be returning to New Orleans anytime soon.

"Meals and Compassion"

Alex Gecan

One by one, we left our hosts. Adam and I were among the last to leave. I don't remember much of Dallas either except it was flat and dry.

Adam and I flipped a coin. Heads we go to Dallas with friends. Tails we go to Gainesville to meet with his family.

Now we were headed back east and we had to cross the entire Gulf South to get there. We dropped Pat Hewlett (BT '06) off at a casino in Shreveport. His family's home in Lakeview had flooded. They would meet him on the gaming floor.

We beat a parabolic arc through Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

Nick Zwolak

We embarked on a road trip to our respective families in Greenville, SC, High Point, NC, and then finally Atlanta, with each stop bringing more dire news from New Orleans. When we realized the situation was far beyond anything we had envisioned, I made my way back home to my folks in Tampa.

Shir Elany

The news said that all the eastbound highways were closed, so we turned onto I-55 and drove up to some motel with free wifi outside of Jackson, Mississippi.

Eric Paulantonio

I continued my evacuation to Connecticut and watched and waited like everyone else.

Kevin Donahoe

We were stuck in Texas. But we heard that the Marshall Civic Center nearby was manned by the Red Cross, National Guard, police, and civic organizations providing information, medical attention, meals and compassion. A resident of Marshall invited us to stay at her home until we were able to return home.

Shir Elany

We searched for flights from Memphis or Atlanta and found one leaving Atlanta the next day.

Alex Gecan

We ran out of gas – more or less – in Coffeenville, a one-horse town just east of the Tombigbee River.

We were in good company, because the one gas station in town had run out of gas, too.

Adam grouched that these small town folks were panicky and selfish to fill up their trucks and boats and four-wheelers and motorcycles and god knows what else and I didn't argue. It was enlightened self-interest on their parts, but that didn't do much to make the Isuzu Rodeo I was sleeping in much more comfortable.

The morning after we found ourselves marooned in Coffeenville, no tanker had arrived. We decided to test the limits of the Rodeo's fuel economy.

We made it to the next town – 22 miles off – with the fuel light on the whole way. When Adam filled up his 17-gallon tank, the gage on the pump read 17.3 gallons.

Adam made hay on both of these oddities, and I didn't feel like reminding him – he an engineer and I a history scholar – that the 17-gallon figure probably did not account for the volume of the cylinder feeding the tank from the cap.

Shir Elany

Thirty-six hours after I left Boston, I was back.

Alex Gecan

I met Adam's parents, his dad a towering goofball and his mother a petite firecracker who, at 45 years old, had decided to get a tattoo of Tigger on her calf. We immediately took off for Walt Disney World.

The first time I spoke to my brother by phone after evacuation, we were on a Disney shuttle boat. All I told Joe was, "I'm on a boat. It's sort of a long story. I'll call you later." For the next six hours he imagined me dredging survivors out of murky floodwater with Sean Penn.

I rode my first rollercoaster, visited my first waterpark and ran as far as I dared through the swampy forest around our hotel. Everywhere we went, Adam's father introduced us by progressively more grandiose honorifics. First we were evacuees, then survivors, then refugees, then heroes.

“Calling Almost Every School”

With the city devastated and all efforts focused on the evacuation and well-being of the citizens of New Orleans, Tulane announced that it would be closing its doors for the fall semester and encouraged their students to attend other universities until they could return – in January – to New Orleans⁶.

Nick Zwolak

I enrolled at the University of South Florida to take classes. But when I found out that we would still have to pay Tulane tuition, I withdrew.

Alex Gecan

Back in Gainesville Adam enrolled at the University of Florida. Everyone else we knew was taking classes back home or wherever they felt like going.

Shir Elany

The bum-rush to find a university for the Fall of 2005 had started. I remember calling almost every school in the northeast and asking them what they could offer students affected by the hurricane, which would later help when I helped some of my pledge brothers find acceptance at the Pi chapter (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute or RPI).

Jay Mattappally

Satish Vembu (**BT '08**), Samir Ali (**BT & Phi, '08**), and I had wanted to go somewhere together. We all looked around for a bit and RPI offered us a full ride. It helped that they had a chapter.

Shir Elany

I was accepted by Columbia but they didn't offer housing. MIT called and said that my application was accepted and that they would provide me with housing. That meant staying at the Rho Alpha (MIT) chapter house for free.

Jay Mattappally

Once we figured out what campus looked like, we showed up to the RPI Zeta house in our Zeta jerseys. We didn't know that the chapter was, at that time, the entire men's basketball team. So all these giant white dudes opened the door and looked down at these three short brown guys in Zeta Psi jerseys. Their faces basically said “what the fuck?” But when they found out that we were brothers from Beta Tau they welcomed us in with open arms. We had a great time hanging there that semester. Lost touch with a lot of them except through facebook but they were great guys.

Shir Elany

I didn't have any clothes so I went to my first classes at MIT wearing newly bought white T-shirts that still had the fold marks on them. The Rho Alpha brothers provided me with anything else I needed. They also tried to help the BT situation out with each brother buying an ugly Beta Tau T-shirt for hurricane relief.

⁶ “Tulane cancels fall semester because of Hurricane Katrina,” The Associated Press. USA Today. Published on December 3, 2005. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2005-09-02-katrina-tulane_x.htm. Accessed on April 14, 2014

Jay Mattappally

We visited the Boston MIT chapter a lot because our pledge brother Shir Elany was there. I remember running into Will Woldenberg (**BT '07**) and Marty Smith (**BT '08**) at the MIT All-Zete Party where we drank everything in sight.

Alex Gecan

I tried to join the Salvation Army, then the Red Cross. It took too long. I booked a flight back to Jersey. I had to do My Part.

The Trenton chapter of the American Red Cross had a much shorter training queue. I enrolled in Emergency Response Vehicle training. At one session I skipped ahead in the manual and found something rather distressing. I raised my hand.

"I think I have to leave."

Somewhat taken aback, the proctor stopped short. "What? Why?"

"It says here you have to be 21 to operate the ERVs. I'm 20."

He expelled a long sigh. "Stick around, we'll talk later."

After the session let out, we walked around the yard. He lung-pumped Marlboro Lights with a desperate ferocity. "When do you turn 21?"

"October 31." It was mid-September.

"I think we'll be alright."

That was that. A week later I was on a flight, paid for by ARC, to Baton Rouge.

To do My Part.

It was the first and last time I ever rode first class.

Eric Paulantonio

Four weeks after the storm, I got word from Corey Dunbar- who also lived in New Orleans- that my house had not flooded and looked intact. I then made one of the hardest decisions of my life and one that I still question; I decided to sell my house and leave New Orleans. No flights were available so I drove back to clean it up and get it ready to sell.

I came in from Covington LA, crossing the 26-mile causeway bridge after 9pm. Driving into the city, the first thing I noticed was the darkness. Normally, after the first crossover on the causeway heading in you can see the lights of the city on the lake. This time there was nothing.

Nick Zwolak

Brian Coblitz (**BT '02**) emailed our internal with a job offer as an assistant at his biochem lab at Johns Hopkins to anyone with biological background. I figured that this was as good an offer as I was going to be able to find without

a bachelors degree until I could resume my studies. Since I didn't have anything to move, Brian put me up in his apartment in Patterson Park of Baltimore, MD.

Alex Gecan

There's a lot they don't tell you before you leave on assignment with a charitable organization in a disaster zone.

They tell you what to do if you're sexually harassed (tell a director) or assaulted (call 911). They tell you that Anheuser-Busch contributes canned water, but that the corporation doesn't waste money on special cans, so it comes in Budweiser cans with little stickers that read "drinking water," and, hardy har, we'll bet you can't tell the difference.

They tell you you'll be sleeping on a cot. That your living quarters will comprise the 36 cubic feet on, under and directly above that cot. That meals will be provided at the beginning, middle and end of each day and, when you get sick of MREs, you have a small per diem to buy food you can actually digest.

They don't tell you that, if you run the ARC debit cards as credit cards at a restaurant, you can turn in a non-itemized credit card receipt with your expense report and charge all the booze you want to the card despite the prohibition on using charitable donations to get sauced.

They tell you never to refuse to give food or care to anyone who asks. It's their policy.

Aaron Ronksley

I spent the semester at home with my parents in Pittsburgh, PA working for a family friend. It was depressing, feeling deprived of college life at a place that felt like home. But any time I felt that way, I quickly felt guilty for feeling personally deprived when so many had lost so much more.

Alex Gecan

It's easy enough to adjust to a new routine. Instead of going to the gym before work, you stand in line for a hurried, lukewarm shower before cramming down an MRE.

You make new friends. Julie, the picky eater; and Megan, the broadcast reporter. They're from the Central Valley. They don't know each other.

Tyler, the lanky 19-year-old who runs dispatch on the ERVs. Lauren, Julie's friend, who's crushing on Tyler. Ray, the one-legged, mustachioed smartass, who talks about "stump-fucking," which is exactly what it sounds like.

There are Marie and Tom, who trained with you in New Jersey. Tom is a garbage man. Marie ... well, you can't remember what she did, and anyway, she leaves a few days in. Her mother gets sick and she has to go back to Jersey.

There's Nick, the union carpenter from Long Island. He's running away from his girlfriend. You've never seen anyone so relieved. There's Keith, the truck driver with an angry wife, and Greg, the family man who had a desk job that didn't lodge in your memory.

Your first night at the volunteer shelter you're so out of sorts that you don't understand what Megan means when she asks if you "want to go somewhere." You figure it out a few days later when Nick tells you a funny story.

Every morning you rise, shower if you can, eat, climb in your ERV, ride to the dispatch yard, fill up with hot food and ice and bottled water and Gatorade and groceries and drive your route. Then you drive all over Slidell until your rig is empty.

Sometimes you spend several days' expenses on a steak dinner. More often you and everybody else drink beer and whiskey on your own dimes or the ARC's and try to stay coherent enough to stumble back into the shelter.

Eric Paulantonio

It was dark. And someone unfamiliar with the city, driving at night, might not have noticed the state the city was in. I was driving to the west bank from the lakefront, in New Orleans and there were no houses with their lights on. At S. Carrollton and I-10 it was pitch black, no streets lights, nothing. All the way into the heart of the city, the prisons and the Superdome. Nothing.

I stayed across the river in Gretna that night. It was untouched.

"Anxious to see my house"

Kevin Donahoe

We came back home to discover that our house had received several feet of water. It had also lost a significant part of the roof and the large greenhouse attached to our home was gone. All of my family and friends had their homes flooded.

Alex Gecan

After a week the shelter supervisors suggest you take a day off. You and Nick and Tom and Julie borrow a sedan from the shelter and drive across the Twin Span into New Orleans.

"I'm going to speed a little bit here," you tell the other three. "I'm a little anxious to see my house."

The traffic lights are all out on South Claiborne Avenue. The limit is 35 but you're going 60. There are boughs and palms fronds everywhere and the radio is silent because, somehow, you haven't yet heard about WWOZ (*note – local radio station WWOZ stayed on the air during Katrina and the aftermath*⁷).

The fraternity house is fine, comparatively speaking. If you'd been standing on the porch a month ago, you could have looked up Broadway and seen the point to which the floodwater had risen. It has long since receded. There are water stains and moldy splotches on your walls.

The soles of your shoes have split, but you remember you have a spare pair in your room – your real room, where you should be living. You swap them out, tie the laces of the busted pair together and garrote it around the power lines outside your house.

You try to get onto your campus but security – police? National Guard? – turns you away. "But I'm with the Red Cross," you protest. Nothing. "And a student?" Nice try. You drive downtown. Nick shows you all how to flatten pennies on a train track. You drive back uptown and show them the river levee by the Audubon Zoo.

⁷ "WWOZ: Remembering Katrina Eight Years After the Storm," WWOZ website. <http://www.wwoz.org/new-orleans-community/katrina-2013>. Accessed on April 14, 2014

Nick unfolds a hammock he brought with him and takes a nap on the levee. You and Tom and Julie go to a bar that isn't there anymore. At some point you leave them to check on somebody else's house, but before you make sure all the locks are in place you drive to Audubon Park, where the grass has grown thigh-high and the silence is deafening before, thank god, some Guardsmen roll by in Humvees.

Kevin Donahoe

We were appreciative of all of the kindness provided to us. We had a fire truck from Texas pull up to our home with firemen delivering peanut butter sandwiches and cold drinks. We had the Red Cross and the Salvation Army meal trucks crisscrossing our neighborhood providing hot meals, cases of military MRE's, and cases of water. Members of a Las Vegas church tore down our green house and helped remove all of the damaged sheet rock in the house. We were very appreciative of everything people did for us.

Alex Gecan

You try to find food in Metairie and settle on a diner you will try to find again years later, and will not be able to. Eventually you all head back to Slidell.

Eric Paulantonio

First morning I came in, I noticed the mass influx of people in pickup trucks, crossing the bridge into New Orleans.

There were really no services in the city. No businesses and nearly every food or convenience store had been looted. Power hadn't been restored to most of the city. Water... well, they had just turned the water on in my neighborhood but we were told not to drink it. There was dirt and debris everywhere; it felt like driving into a giant construction site.

I went right to my house from I-10 down Carrollton towards the river bend. I passed an endless line of refrigerators sitting on the curb as if waiting for the world's worst parade. They were usually decorated with people complaining about Bush, FEMA and New Orleans Saints owner Tom Benson (*Editors note – Benson had recently made an ill-timed public statement about potentially moving the Saints permanently to San Antonio*⁸).

Corey was right - my house did not flood and the front door had not been kicked in. But the RiteAid around the corner had a folk lift driven through the front door. There was a little bit of wind and rain damage and the refrigerators were destroyed. I should have bought a lottery ticket, but there was nowhere to buy one.

Corey Dunbar (Treasurer of the Zeta Psi Association of Tulane, Inc.)

As far as the fraternity house goes, there isn't that much to say. We got pretty lucky. The damage consisted of flooding in the basements, plaster falling off a few ceilings downstairs and upstairs, and some damage to the Spanish tile roof. The basement was pumped, the plaster repaired, and all of the tiles were removed and replaced with asphalt shingles. Insurance covered it all.

Nick Zwolak

⁸ "Saints' march back to New Orleans still tempered by Katrina's harsh realities," Jim Corbett. USA Today. Published on July 2nd, 2006. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/saints/2006-06-28-return-cover_x.htm?POE=SPOISVA. Accessed on April 14, 2014

I never made it back to New Orleans before the start of the next semester. My apartment saw a couple feet of water with mold about hip high. I lost all of my engineering books and all of the furniture that Eric Paulantonio had given me when he moved in with his girlfriend that summer. I was able to salvage my computer and hanging clothes and that was nice. My losses can't compare to the other tragedies in the city.

Alex Gecan

You go to New Orleans a second time, this time with Tim and JP. There's a house fire blazing in the Seventh Ward so you exit early and drive as close as you can, then creep through backyards so JP can take video.

"I'm a photographer," you remember he had told you when you met. He is the first of the chroniclers that you recognize. The first of the carpetbagger poets. Tim is the second. Two days after the fire he will sign on for an eight-week tour so he can write a book about His Experience.

As the flames devour a two-story house and JP films and Tim looks on hungrily, you hang back. You're a little disgusted, and a little scared, and really, all you want is a drink.

Eric Paulantonio

I hauled the refrigerators to the curb and took a tour of the city. It was as bad as you could imagine or saw on TV.

There were a lot of signs posted like you'd see in New Orleans whenever a vote was upcoming. Instead of promoting a person for some office they say things like "House Gutting 259-4415," anti-Blanco (*Note – then-Governor Kathleen Blanco*) signs and demolition contractors hiring people.

I drove up Carrolton towards the lake. There was a big fire on Carrolton near Walmsly that reduced 3 giant houses to piers. Near the interstate there was a lot of water (I think the waterline was up to about 8-12 feet). City Park had been stripped bare. They've cleaned up a lot, but it feels like most of the trees are gone.

Lake View was a graveyard. All the houses empty, debris still piled up, roads mostly covered in trash and dirt. Everything was dead, brown, and silent. No power, pitch black at night.

I drove down West End and in the giant neutral ground there were mountains of trash. Where there wasn't trash, there were flooded out cars. I lost count. I realized that mountains had order, they were separated by type of trash. There were mountains of trees and green waste. There were separate mountains of debris...for people's bulldozed houses.

Alex Gecan

You try to get onto campus again – "We're a film crew!" – but security isn't having it. You go to The Boot, and the bar manager pours drinks with one hand and brandishes a titanic handgun with the other. You go to the Kingpin, where you run into Beetle. He had been a delivery driver for the pizzeria where you cooked for the last three years. You play shuffleboard and drink Abita and, after perhaps one or six too many, drive back across the Twin Span.

You've been ignoring your phone, but you're getting bizarre messages from New Jersey and California and Florida.

You hop back on the ERVs. You're handing a clamshell of red beans and rice to a pretty blonde when a synapse fires and you blurt out "French 201!"

And she recognizes you, too. "What are you doing here?"

"This, I guess. Your house OK?"

"We'll be fine."

"I guess I'll see you."

"Yeah."

The same day you're passing cornbread to a married couple while their golden retriever, its fur matted and dreadlocked, pants nearby.

"We had to leave her here, she wouldn't come with us," the woman tells you. "We came back. I can't believe she was OK." You don't realize for years afterward how badly she had needed to tell someone that, and you just happened to drive up.

Kevin Donahoe

Mike Jaklitsch was my big brother in Zeta Psi (**BT '82**) and he was the first person to contact me. He invited us to live in his home in Boston until we were able to return to Metairie. He knew that my mom had battled several cancers, including lung cancer, and was concerned for her health being exposed to inhaling mold. We appreciated his offer but declined.

Mike is a thoracic surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital and came to my aid later that year. We were cleaning up the homes of some senior citizens in the neighborhood when my left ring finger began to swell. The swelling extended to my left hand and entire arm. For more than a year local doctors reassured me it was "just a sprained finger."

But an infectious disease specialist diagnosed the swelling as the antibiotic-resistant Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA). He stated my left hand and part of the arm should be amputated since the MRSA had spread. I was born with a birth defect of my right hand, so losing the left hand and arm would have been devastating. I called Mike who said to go with whatever antibiotics the doctors wanted to give me and to save amputation as the last resort. I followed Mike's instructions which saved my hand and arm from being amputated.

Alex Gecan

Then it's your turn to cycle out. Your three weeks are up. You've done Your Part.

The dead are still dead, and the other survivors are still, for the most part, fucked.

Aaron Ronksley

I stopped back in mid November when we were allowed to get stuff from our dorm rooms, since I had evacuated with a weeks worth of clothing. It kinda felt like a ghost town so we didn't really spend much time in the city.

Eric Paulantonio

That drive around the city reaffirmed my decision to leave. I could see the nightmare it was and how it would continue to be for some time. I stayed for a week cleaning and packing up the house. I dreaded it every morning as I drove in. The emptiness and sadness was overwhelming. The feeling of desperation hung over everything.

My work was in construction and as much of a part of me wanted to help with re-building, I knew what it would be like not only to try and put my life back together, but also to be involved with so many others trying to do the same thing. I was lucky enough to have options outside of New Orleans. It seemed like a good a time as any to take advantage of them and start fresh.

"Better than Ever"

Jay Mattappally

We always knew we had to come back and help rebuild our city.

Shir Elany

I was determined to go back to Tulane with all the knowledge I gained, bring over Zeta customs from Rho Alpha and other chapters that I visited.

Alex Gecan

I used my ARC card to buy a new backpack, to replace the one that got shredded while deployed, then I turned the rest of the money back in to the organization. I was surprised at how little I had spent.

Nick Zwolak

One of the great highlights of that fall was the Tulane - Navy game in Annapolis which saw an extremely large group of Tulane alumni, Zetas and other fellow Katrina Diaspora's.

Alex Gecan

The most excitement I saw that weekend was when my minivan blew a serpentine belt in northern Virginia. I was taking Matt Bradley back to the Virginia Theological Seminary, and was dropping Nick Zwolak off at Johns Hopkins on my way north.

After finally tracking down a tow truck – no easy task in Virginia on a Sunday – we hunkered down to wait. I napped and Matt read while Nick practiced karate on the grass next to the 395 on-ramp where we sat.

Shir Elany

I mean, it didn't seem like there was any other option when Tulane pleaded with all the universities in the U.S to not accept transfer students.

Nick Zwolak

Arriving back in the city for the new semester, my landlord had assured me that everything would be ready to go when I came back. Arriving back into New Orleans for the first time since the storm, I was amazed that I could actually see stars in the city, but this was because so much of the city's electric grid hadn't been restored, nor did the trees on the street have leaves to block the night sky.

Shir Elany

Sometime that fall, a letter of encouragement was sent by Tulane President Scott Cowen promising that the school would return better than ever.

Kevin Donahoe

We constantly looked for humor to get us through the recovery. I celebrated my 50th birthday in November 2005. I had saved special Stouffer MREs for my wife and I to enjoy for the occasion. We had just sat down to eat when there was a knock on the door. It was a group of men delivering our FEMA trailer. Katherine and I looked at each other and began laughing because how many people can say they became a senior citizen AND reduced to trailer trash all in one day?

Thanks Katrina!

Shir Elany

On the third page of the letter in a short paragraph he notified that 6 majors would be cut to make the whole "Tulane Renewal" plan work; one of them was Mechanical Engineering, which was my major. I later got another letter saying that I had to either switch majors or switch universities.

Nick Zwolak

I had to wait a few weeks until water was restored and a couple of weeks more until electricity was restored at the apartment. I had to use my sleeping bag in addition to the normal bed linens because it still gets damn cold in New Orleans in January.

Aaron Ronksley

Let's just say that there was a lot of confusion regarding why certain establishments were closing at 9PM after having remained open 24 hours prior to the storm.

That and Military Police regularly driving around. That never felt right.

Shir Elany

Since it was too late to transfer, I returned to Tulane in the start of the spring semester. Most of my stuff was gone; I had never even turned on the brand new TV. But I was back. The city was emptier then before, lacking a certain scent in the air, but those were happy times.

Alex Gecan

Greg eventually mails you a photograph – film was still a thing back then – of your third day at the shelter. It's raining, and everybody is already sunburnt but still smiling. Ready to do Their Parts.

"Thank You, America"

Nick Zwolak

Looking back at that first semester, my head was not in the right place to deal with the issues that I either didn't understand or acknowledge when I came back. My grades suffered and I was put on academic probation after the first semester of grad school.

Shir Elany

That was my most memorable Mardi Gras. I helped rear in the new pledge class and then parted with the city I loved, my chapter, and my pledge brothers. 4 of 14 Brothers in my pledge class did not return to Tulane.

Nick Zwolak

I still completed all of my course work that year, but didn't complete my thesis until after the deadline for December graduation. Luckily I was able to focus and complete my thesis without the distraction of classes, and was able to relax and enjoy New Orleans before blowing all my money on a backpacking trip to New Zealand.

Kevin Donahoe

Believe it or not, there were some highlights to my Katrina experience. I met and talked with President George H.W. Bush for the second time and President Bill Clinton for the first time. I appeared on some nationally televised program to raise money for the area wearing a Tulane sweat shirt and holding the sign, "Thank you, America." I was later featured on the front of the Tulane Hullabaloo holding the "Thank you, America" for the first anniversary parade for Katrina.

Shir Elany

I transferred to Columbia in the Fall of 2006. I would later bring together the 3 chapters, coordinating trips with brothers I used to live with, in 2 other states.

I learned what it meant to be a Zeta during that year, I was accepted by a group of guys that had never met me before, and acquiring friends for life.

The whole thing sucked, but I learned from it, and grew from it, and took the best out of it; at Zeta conventions I was known to some as "the guy from 3 chapters".

Nick Zwolak

I cannot express my thankfulness to everyone that helped me in Baltimore when I was there. As a token of my appreciation, I've sent both the family I stayed with and Brian's lab a king cake every Mardi Gras afterwards.

Eventually, I realized that the city post Katrina, while still livable, would never be quite the same again and only much later did I realize how much this event had affected me. I can definitely say that the fraternity was a key factor in returning everyone's lives back to some sort of normalcy (if there is such a standard in New Orleans) if only for the fact it provided a support group for us. Knowing that everyone in the fraternity was going through the same process was instrumental in dealing with everything.

Kevin Donahoe

The other aspect of Hurricane Katrina, the cloud with a silver lining, was the chance to see America - and the world- bring compassion, love, and support in the rebuilding of not only New Orleans but the entire Gulf Coast.

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Alex Gecan

Years after we patched up the chapter house, the whole thing went up in flames – one of three and a half Greek houses to burn down at Tulane within two years of each other.

It has since been rebuilt, sitting in the same footprint as the old house.