

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
reads like fiction but
it's all true

Nonfiction

Our World Turned to

Water

Surviving the Louisiana Flood of 2016 **By Lauren Tarshis**

Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Melissa LeMay



On August 29, 2016, I received an email from Margaret Boudreaux [boo-DROH], a teacher at Episcopal School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. “We have just suffered a great flood, a thousand-year flood,” she wrote. “Much of our school was damaged, and many of our students and teachers lost their homes.”

At the time, I had been reading a lot about the devastating flooding that had recently struck Louisiana. In the city of Baton Rouge, many areas were submerged under 10 feet of water. Thousands of people had lost everything they owned.

But that was only one part of the story that Mrs. Boudreaux and her students wanted to share with me. “This disaster brought out the good in people,” she continued. “People rushed to help each other. My students and I invite you to visit us, to meet boys and girls who can tell you this story firsthand.”

And so last November, I flew down to Baton Rouge to meet the inspiring kids and teachers of Episcopal.

This is their story.



Lauren Tarshis

As You Read Think about how the community responded to the disaster.

You’ll meet these amazing people in this story:



Addisyn



Skyler



Dell



Mrs. Boudreaux

Eleven-year-old Addisyn Botos was up to her neck in **frigid**, filthy water. It was Saturday, August 13, 2016, and devastating floods were sweeping across Louisiana. In Addisyn’s Baton Rouge neighborhood, the waters had risen so quickly that she and her parents, two brothers, and sister had become trapped. They were caught in front of their house as stinking brown water rushed all around them.

Shivering and terrified, Addisyn gripped a wooden post on her porch to stop the powerful current from sweeping her away. With each passing minute, the water rose higher. “I’ve never been so scared,” Addisyn remembers.

How would she and her family escape?

Dangerous Conditions

Two days earlier, on the morning of Thursday, August 11, the skies above Baton Rouge were gray and rainy. But inside Episcopal School, the mood was sunny. It was orientation day—a time to meet new teachers and catch up with old friends. The hallways buzzed with the energy of students in crisp blue and plaid uniforms, their hair combed and curled for pictures.

There was Skyler Adams, a sixth-grader, who was swapping stories with his pals about summer adventures. There was Dell Portwood, a 12th-grader, who was psyched for his senior year on the football team. And there was Addisyn, who couldn’t wait to begin fifth grade.

“We were all so happy to start school,” says Mrs. Boudreaux, who

teaches language arts. “We weren’t worried about a little rain.”

What no one at Episcopal realized was that this rain was unlike any they had ever seen. In fact, it was part of a dangerous and rare storm system. A vast amount of moisture in the air was producing exceedingly heavy rains. Imagine millions of fire hoses hanging from the sky, all turned on full blast. Even worse? The storm was moving slowly, which meant that it would hover over Baton Rouge for days.

On the Thursday morning of Episcopal’s orientation, the National Weather Service issued flash-flood warnings for parts of southern Louisiana. Flash floods, which kill on average 130 Americans every year, occur when great quantities of rain fall during a short period of time. In a flash flood, lazy rivers, quiet streams,

and peaceful creeks explode into powerful **torrents** of churning water—with little or no warning.

And that is exactly what was about to happen in Baton Rouge.

Two of the area’s main rivers, the Amite [AY-meet] and the Comite [KOH-meet], were creeping up over their banks. Meanwhile, excess water in these two rivers was beginning to back up into their many **tributaries**—creeks and streams and bayous that squiggle into almost every corner of Baton Rouge.

A major flooding disaster was taking shape.

Stranded

The next day, Friday, most schools in Baton Rouge—including Episcopal—were closed because of flooded roadways. The area near Episcopal remained

FATAL FLOODS

Flash floods occur in all 50 states and are the most dangerous type of flood. On average, flash floods cause more deaths in the U.S. each year than any other weather disaster. According to the National Weather Service, more than half of all flash-flood fatalities happen in vehicles.

clear, however, and those living in the area felt safe.

“We had never flooded before,” says Dell, the 12th-grade football player, who lives near the school.

Skyler also lives in an area that had always been safe from flooding, as does the Botos family. But soon, even historically safe areas of the city would be in grave danger.

On Saturday morning, Skyler, who had slept at a friend’s house, woke up to the sound of his phone ringing. It was his mother calling.

“The house is flooded,” she said. “Everything is gone.”

In Dell’s neighborhood, water rushed through the streets. Episcopal’s athletic fields turned into lakes, complete with lapping waves. When the



The Botos family’s truck in the floodwaters



Botos family woke up, they saw water in the road in front of their house and in their backyard. They were worried about damage to their truck, so at about 7 a.m., they decided to leave. They had barely made it down the driveway when flash floods started. Water gushed up through the bottom of the truck and stalled the engine.

“First our feet were wet,” Mrs. Botos says. “Then we had water up to our waists, and then our chests.”

Just a few inches of water on a road can create hazardous driving conditions. One foot of water will float many vehicles. Two feet can turn a pickup or an SUV on its side or sweep it away like a bath toy. The pressure of water against car doors can make them impossible to open, trapping passengers inside. Every year, dozens of people in vehicles lose their lives trying to escape floods.

Luckily, Mrs. Botos managed to break one of the truck’s windows, and the kids in the backseat were able to ram open one of the doors. Addisyn’s 16-year-old brother, Marcus, grabbed hold of their 8-year-old brother, Brennen, and Addisyn held tight to her mom as her dad freed their two dogs from their crates in the back. Then Mr. Botos used straps from the truck to tie the family and dogs together



Volunteers used their own boats to rescue people from flooded homes and cars.

so nobody would be carried away by the strong current. They slowly pushed their way through the rushing water and back toward their flooding house. It was the only place they could go; there was no dry land in sight, nowhere to escape to as the waters rose higher and higher.

They were stranded.

Calls for Help

Across Baton Rouge and in surrounding towns, emergency operators were receiving frantic calls for help.

“I’m stuck in my car!”

“We’re on the roof of our house!”

“Please help us!”

From the sky, Baton Rouge



looked more like a lake than a city. Church spires and rooftops poked out of brown, rippling water. Partially submerged cars looked like shiny sea creatures. In a city not far from Baton Rouge, caskets in a cemetery rose out of the **oversaturated** ground and floated down the streets.

Meanwhile, the Botos family huddled together on their porch in the freezing water, which stank of oil and gas. Addisyn clung to a post, the water now reaching her neck. Adding to the family’s misery

were the fire ants swarming in the water, stinging their arms and legs. Hours passed. There seemed to be no escape—and nobody to help. Rescue workers were overwhelmed. Fire trucks were stuck.

But as the situation worsened, the people of Baton Rouge **mobilized** to help each other. By mid-morning, a “navy” of volunteers had taken to the flooded streets in their own boats. Mrs. Boudreaux’s 22-year-old son, Elliott, was one of hundreds who plucked neighbors from rooftops and cars. Volunteers climbed through windows to help the elderly and people with disabilities. They comforted crying children and calmed jittery cats and dogs.

It was one of these volunteer boats—piloted by an old friend of Mrs. Botos—that finally rescued the Botos family. They were taken to a gas station; when that area flooded, a second boat ferried them to a parking lot. It wasn’t until late that afternoon that an army truck brought the Botos family to a fire station, where Addisyn’s aunt came to pick them up. After nearly nine agonizing hours, the family was at last safe and dry.

“What Can I Do?”

In the coming days, as the waters **receded**, thousands of people across southern Louisiana returned to their homes to find utter ruin. Even a small amount of water can cause extensive damage. When floodwaters retreat, a sickening sludge

How to Stay Safe

FLASH FLOOD

1

Avoid driving on flooded roads.

Even if the water seems shallow, you won’t be able to tell if the ground has been washed out. Water can rise suddenly and rapidly. Water that reaches to the tops of tires can sweep a vehicle away.



2

Move to higher ground.

If you get a flash-flood warning, don’t wait to see water before leaving the area. Just 6 inches of moving water can have enough force to knock you over and carry you away.



3

Beware of charged water.

After a flood, avoid walking or driving through standing water as it may contain hazardous materials or be electrically charged from fallen power lines.



4

Keep an emergency kit.

Have clean water, food, batteries, flashlights, medication, and other essentials on hand in case you become stranded.



5

Have a plan.

With your family, come up with a plan for where you and your pets will go in the event of a flash flood.



of mud, oil, dead worms, and other filth is left behind. Carpets must be ripped out and replaced. Damp and moldy walls must be demolished. Many people lost everything they owned—furniture, computers, clothing, and priceless photos.

Dell and his family were among the fortunate; their house did not flood.

“All I could think was, how can I help?” Dell recalls. “What can I do?”

The answer?

A lot.

Even before the floodwaters cleared, the Episcopal community was coming together. Those who had been spared flooding in their homes worked to help those in

need. Donations poured in, and students and teachers joined together to help clean homes, haul away trash, and **salvage** items that had escaped the waters.

“It was amazing what people did for us,” says Skyler, whose home took many months to repair.

“That’s Just Stuff”

The Louisiana Flood of 2016 was the worst natural disaster in the U.S. since Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The flood dumped a staggering three feet of rain in some areas. That’s three times the amount that fell during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Thirteen people died; an estimated 143,000 homes flooded. Nine schools in the Baton

Rouge area remained closed all year, forcing thousands of students to crowd into schools far from their homes. More than a year later, many people still struggle with the losses they suffered.

Compared with many across southern Louisiana, the people within the Episcopal community were fortunate. The school reopened just a week after the flood. The damaged gym and fields were repaired within months. Most important, the community rallied around those who needed help.

Like so many at Episcopal, the Botos family looks back on their experience mainly with gratitude—gratitude to be part of a supportive community, gratitude for how everyone came together to help each other. (At press time, the family was living in an apartment near the school while final repairs were being made to their house.)

Addisyn misses certain treasured items that she lost—her jewelry, her dolls, her Bible. But as her mom says, “That’s just stuff.”

“We’ve gained so much more than we lost,” Mrs. Botos continues. “The lessons we’ve learned are so amazing. We feel that we have been blessed beyond our imagination.”

Addisyn agrees: “We are very lucky.” ●

THE AFTERMATH
The flood cleanup continued for months as debris was hauled from homes, schools, and other buildings. At press time, some areas were still undergoing repairs.



Zhang Chaoqun/Newscam (damaged home); Zhang Chaoqun Xinhua/eyevine/Redux (cleanup)

Sakdawit Tangtongsap/Shutterstock.com

Poem

What We Know

By Rebecca Kai Dotlich

We shared soup, sandwiches, cots,
dry pajamas, prayers, as we rolled
up sleeves, eased fears, held hands.
With quiet nods, we came to know
that just when worlds
turn upside down,
someone, somewhere
hands out raincoats, sets up games,
gives out books, calls our names . . .
unwrinkles the worry, smooths the sorrow,
offers a blueprint
for tomorrow.

Writing Contest

According to the article and poem, what can people do to help others who experience disasters? Explain in an essay, using evidence from both texts. Send your essay to **Louisiana Flood Contest**. Five winners will get *Ninth Ward* by Jewell Parker Rhodes. See page 2 for details.

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