Our World Turned to Water

Surviving the Louisiana Flood of 2016

By Lauren Tarshis
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.

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 sinking 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 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 large 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. That is exactly what was about to happen in Baton Rouge.

Two of the area’s main rivers, the Amite [AY-mit] and the Comite [KOH-mit], were creeping up over their banks. Meanwhile, excess water in these two rivers was beginning to back up into their many tributaries—creoks and streams and bayous that squiggled 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 flooded, and much of the city was still under water. It was 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...
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 Addisyn’s 16-year-old brother, 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 arrived 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

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.

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Hundreds of people surrounded the army’s truck as it tried to pull away. 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.

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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.