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Katrina's Kids: A new life in L.A.

Far from New Orleans



Evan Yee/Staff Photographer

Taft High School student James Darby IV, 17, and his trumpet have settled in to life in the Los Angeles area after moving west in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The secret of feeling at home: Looking ahead, not back, James says.

Evacuees struggle to feel at home here

By Naush Boghossian — Staff Writer

Donte Gentry is stuck between the world he knew and loved and the one that has embraced him in the wake of the nation's biggest natural disaster.

One of 250 "Katrina Kids" who arrived in the Los Angeles school system in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, the 11-year-old and his family have set up a household here in Los Angeles. But it's not really their home.

"I miss all the food: the crawfish, crabs, shrimp, all the

seafood," said Donte, a fifth-grader at North Hills' Gledhill Elementary School, ticking off what he misses most about his hometown.

His sister chimed in with two obvious omissions: red beans and andouille sausage. "All we have here are tacos and burritos."

Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans Aug. 29 as a

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— Donte Gentry and his sister, on what they miss most about New Orleans

Katrina evacuees still miss New Orleans

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category 5 storm, one of the most powerful to hit the U.S. mainland since records have been kept. In the aftermath, hundreds of thousands fled the coastal city, most to Texas and Mississippi, but thousands of others scattered across the country, including several hundred

who ended up in Los Angeles, mostly because they had family here.

The struggle for many of these children has generally been one of getting used to a city that is a far cry from their Southern home.

"The transition is not so much the trauma of leaving as it's the trauma of acceptance, of

arriving and of how you're received," said Robert R. Butterworth, a Los Angeles psychologist who specializes in trauma. "They're psychological refugees — they're missing the food, the climate, the friends, the way people interact."

James Darby IV, a 17-year-old senior at Taft High School in Woodland Hills, has immersed himself in the sea of differences.

He shares eagerly a Hebrew word an Israeli friend taught him: *achil*, meaning brother. "We always say, Hello, *achil*!" when we see each other," James said, unable to contain his excitement at knowing the word.

"The similarities lie in the differences. It's the most exciting part of being here," he said. "I love that people are proud of where they came from."

He remembers when one of his first days at the school, someone came up to him and said, "I bet you've never seen a Persian before."

"And he was right, I hadn't," he said, smiling.

James, who comes from a performing arts school once attended by jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, left Louisiana before the storm hit with about four changes of clothes, his own trumpet and a handful of CDs — accidentally leaving behind one of his favorite artists, Clifford Brown. "That was a big mistake."

But for all his love of New Orleans, its flavor, its music, the 17-year-old said it's time to move on.

"I just do everything by faith and live day by day. I don't dwell on the past," James said. "When God takes something from you, he blesses you with a lot more than he took. I live in Los Angeles, I live in a nice house, I have food, I have all the basic necessities, so why should I look back? It happened for a reason."

Even James' new friends are taken aback by his self-assuredness and easy transition into Los Angeles life.

"I think he's one of the most respectful friends I have. He succeeds at school and with friends," said 16-year-old friend Adir Bar-Noy. "It takes a lot of guts to go from New Orleans to here and be normal, just cool. If I would do that, I'd be nervous, but he's just fine. He's brave."

The primary concern for schools that accept students from other locations is transition difficulties, said psychologist Caren Caty, who counsels at Gledhill Elementary, where three of the Gentry kids attend school.

Students, especially younger ones, need guidance to help them through the transition, she said.

"It's almost like culture shock. Adjustment and adaptation are the things we work on to help bring about a sense of stability," Caty said.

Donte Gentry's older brother Joshua said he misses everything about his home, especially his school band, in which he played the trumpet. His current school doesn't have a band.

There are amusement parks and basketball games at local parks, but what the kids miss is grandma's gumbo and church on Sunday, mom Monique Gentry said.

Now all six Gentrys are usually in their hotel room by 4:30 p.m., where a video game and board games keep them occupied through the evening.

Sharing a room — four sleep on the two queen beds, one on



Donte Gentry, 11, sits in his classroom at Gledhill Elementary School in North Hills, where he has been a student since Hurricane Katrina destroyed his family's home in New Orleans.



Darrion Weems, 17, a junior at Taft High School, shares a laugh with classmate Vicky Jorna during an American literature class. He landed at Taft after being displaced by Hurricane Katrina.



James Darby IV, a 17-year-old senior at Taft High School, is shown in a football uniform, number 77.

the floor and one in an armchair — where each has to fight for space to do homework, there is little the Gentrys can be excited about except for the fact that they're alive and closer to each other after the whole tragedy.

"I prefer living in New Orleans," said 12-year-old Joshua. "It's a better place for me. I can see my family more and I miss playing the trumpet. When I think back about how I used to live, it's a whole lot different. I have dreams that I'm back there and everything is beautiful."

Most of the evacuees the Los Angeles Unified School District has accommodated did not experience the hurricane, floating bodies and the horrific shelters, so they've adjusted well to their new classrooms, with help from district counseling and tutoring services, officials said.

"They're displaced, but they haven't lost anybody. They've lost their roots, but not their families," Butterworth said. "It's hard to leave your roots, but it's much easier when you have your intact families with you."

Part of the success of students' transition to Los Angeles could be the small group of displaced victims, Butterworth said. The presence of Katrina victims was not intrusive and made it easier for them to blend into the schools and receive personalized attention from administrators and teachers.

In Texas, where more than 100,000 children were evacuated, there's a great deal of resentment against those who have come into the school district and tensions between the two groups are flaring up, said Dr. Marlene Wong, director of crisis counseling and intervention services at LAUSD, who visited the state's schools.

Here, it's been so easy to blend in that James Darby had not met Darrion Weems, another of Katrina's kids on Taft's campus, until they were

brought together by a reporter for an interview.

Darrion, 17, moved to Los Angeles less than a week after Katrina slammed into New Orleans and adjusted to the school quickly, largely because he's surrounded by his family, but also because he was able to continue playing football. He has made fast friends among his teammates as they played through the season and into the city section semifinals.

The high school junior pulls A's and B's in every class except for Algebra II, and he's positioning himself to get a college football scholarship.

"Everybody here greeted me with open arms. It wasn't that bad," he said. "It helps to have a group of people who are your friends and are there for you, and my family's all here."

"You can't dwell on the past. You'll die thinking about it. You gotta keep moving."

Caty, the school psychologist, cautions that it could take up to a year before the trauma of being uprooted hits Katrina's kids, especially the younger ones.

In the meantime, teachers and tutors are helping students catch up on work that is often more academically rigorous than they had in New Orleans schools, which are historically among the nation's poorest-performing schools.

Teachers in Los Angeles monitor the students for grade-level performance and to determine what resources are needed to help, said Betsy Garvin, the younger Gentrys' principal at Gledhill.

Monique Gentry said there was plenty of room to grow in the kids' first report cards, which came earlier this month. But the school is providing after-school tutoring to bring the kids up to speed.

For James Darby, the young jazz enthusiast, his future lies in his new home. He boasted a 3.5 grade-point average at the rigorous performing arts school he attended in Louisiana, but his grades slipped while attending three schools in three states since the beginning of the school year.

He promises he'll get back on top of his grades: "I still have an A-student mentality."

But for the Gentry family, its future is back in New Orleans — back home — once the federal subsidies for their hotel run out in January.

"Everybody we've met says they want to go back. That's where we called home, where I lived 17 years," Monique Gentry said. "That's where I belong."

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