

Do you feel lucky?

BY STACEY L. MORRISON

The first thing a disaster victim tells you is how lucky he is. Lucky to be alive. Lucky to have family left. Lucky to have family to come to. While most of the country is thinking how cursed the Gulf Coast is, the survivors see themselves differently. You can watch them on the news, thanking God rather than cursing him for the destruction. Glad to survive, ready to rebuild. It says something good about the human spirit.

My family is no exception. They see themselves as fortunate. They are safe with me and my teenage son in my little house in Bloomfield. And indeed, they are much more fortunate than most residents of the city of New Orleans. They still have homes to return to. My brothers live in the Lower Garden District. My mother and 92-year-old grandmother own a home just off St. Charles Avenue. Three different residences, all within a mile of each other, and none of their homes touched by water, while 80 percent of the city flooded.

None of them had any idea when they moved there, 10 years ago, that they were living far from the levees, on high ground. And the fact that they found someone to drive them out of the city in a safe vehicle after all hope was gone — well, you sure don't get any luckier than that.

Already, the memory of their seven-day post-Katrina ordeal

seems far away and unbelievable, even to them. With no car to leave the city, my family was trapped at my mother's house with no electricity or running water. They ran out of fresh food, washed dishes in water saved in the bathtub, rationed the precious bottled water, and hid in their house for days, afraid of looters but more afraid to call the authorities despite a working phone.

With my grandmother's health

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so fragile, they were sure that a trip to the Superdome or a bus ride to Houston would kill her. They had an emergency radio, powered by hand-cranking, which had more to do with planning than luck, since they had acquired it after the last hurricane scare. Even so, the radio was a godsend because it helped them make decisions that saved their lives. That the phone was working was more than lucky; it was nothing short of miraculous. Talking to people who love them, like me in New Jersey, gave them courage.

Every day that week, I spoke to my brother several times a day and we discussed how bad things were,

how sick my grandmother was getting, how they might get out. Some people say you make your own luck. That was never truer than in this case, when my brother cleverly coaxed and charmed my mother's eccentric Southern belle of a boss to drive them all to the safety of Baton Rouge. They made the airport in time to catch the only plane going anywhere that day. I know. I booked it. I joked with my mother that it only took the nation's worst

natural disaster to get them to visit me in New Jersey.

Once they got here, I had to tell everyone my family's remarkable story. It was unbelievable to me that in a country so wealthy and powerful, ordinary Americans like my family were left to their own devices to survive. I told store clerks, co-workers, friends, almost anyone who would listen. Of course, everyone commented on how lucky they are.

But though my mother was grateful to be out of New Orleans, she was sick with grief, because she had been forced to leave her cats behind. Despite signing up on the Internet with animal rescue orga-

nizations, nothing was done for her pets. Unable to bear it any longer, 10 days after their arrival in New Jersey, my mother and brother drove my cousin's minivan back to Louisiana to evacuate my mother's cats. They got into New Orleans despite the checkpoints, and got out without incident or accident, though it was a five-day trip of over 2,600 miles. The cats are alive and well. They are now living in my finished basement. One of them is even named Lucky.

Every day now, the living room television loudly blares CNN from early morning until dusk. My grandmother is more than a little hard of hearing. They yearn for information, especially anything about when they might be able to return home. But they also understand that no matter how well the water pumping proceeds, despite Mayor Ray Nagin's claims, it would be pushing their luck to return before the power is on and the water is safe.

Is my family lucky? Oh yes. But these days, all of us live in a world of possible catastrophic disaster, natural or man-made. In a post-9/11 world, the state of New Jersey, like every other state, should have a plan. No one can control nature's wrath or always stop a terrorist attack. But in the United States, luck should have nothing to do with whether your family survives an evacuation. Let's learn something from Katrina.

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