

# Waukegan moms recall Hurricane Katrina 'nightmare' 10 years later



Gladys Bombace with her daughters Lilly, 12, Isabella, 10 and Bridget, 13, at a playground Tuesday, Aug. 25, near their McKinley Avenue home in Waukegan. (By Jim Newton / Lake County News-Sun)

By **Jim Newton** News-Sun

"It wasn't a curse. It was a blessing," Hurricane Katrina evacuee says of life in Lake County

Gladys Bombace arrived at O'Hare International Airport on Sept. 5, 2005, with her three young girls, \$40, a weathered photo ID and a plastic bag full of clothes soaked by Hurricane Katrina.

Nearly 10 years later, with help from several "angels" along the way, Bombace has made Lake County her family's permanent home. Her daughters, too young to even remember the devastating Gulf Coast hurricane, were back in their Waukegan schools this week along with the friends they've made in their adopted hometown.

"I'll be forever grateful that this community opened their arms to us, even though we're not from here," Bombace, a single mother, said Tuesday as she reflected on the decade since Katrina struck her former home in Kenner, La., near New Orleans.



In the days and months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, many Lake County residents were busy doing anything they could to make life better for evacuees arriving in the Chicago area. ( Jim Newton )

"They understood what we had been through," she said while keeping a watchful eye on her daughters — Bridget, 13, Lilly, 12, and Isabella, 10 — as they played in a park near their McKinley Avenue home.

Bombace, 24 at the time of the hurricane, was born and raised in New Orleans. Her new home in late summer 2005 was 30 minutes away in Kenner, which borders Lake Pontchartrain.

"The house was completely flooded. Literally, water was up to our chests," Bombace recalled.

Outside, things were even worse.

"I remember a complete nightmare. There was a dead baby floating in the water. People were on their roof tops screaming for help," Bombace said. "We had no choice but to leave."



## Thousands of volunteers, forever moved by Katrina

Bombace and her girls were first evacuated to Houston, where volunteers bought them airline tickets. Bombace said she chose Chicago even though she had never even been to Illinois, and had no relatives in the area. It was Chicago that drew her.

"I don't know why. I have faith," she said. "Through my faith in God I believe this is what he wanted me to do with my life."

Her faith began to pay off as soon as the Bombaces arrived at O'Hare.

Soon after realizing she didn't have enough money for even one night at a hotel in the Rosemont area, Bombace said a businesswoman asked her what was wrong. When the woman learned she was a Katrina evacuee, she invited Bombace and her baby girls to stay with her for several days in her hotel room.



Bridget Bombace, 12, who has no memories of leaving her home near New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina 10 years ago, gathered flowers near her Waukegan home Tuesday, Aug. 25. (By Jim Newton / Lake County News-Sun)

The woman then brought the Bombaces to meet her relatives in Racine, Wis., where the family was invited to stay for several months. A dating relationship then led Bombace and her girls to a new home in Waukegan. The relationship didn't last, but Waukegan did.

Bombace said community members have opened their arms, hearts and even wallets to her family.

A nearby store owner not only extends her credit but has even lent her money when needed, Bombace said.

"We came from out of state and he's been here all his life, but he opened his heart," Bombace said.

A teacher has become so close to her girls that Bombace said "she has adopted my children as her grandchildren," even buying a new pair of shoes so one of the girls could attend a school dance in something other than sneakers.

A local church opened its food pantry to the family and helped with clothes as well.

"It's just people like this, they came out of nowhere," Bombace said.

She said her mother, who still lives in the New Orleans area, has tried encouraging her to return. But Bombace said that while New Orleans will always be her hometown, the uncertainty of a move back would be too much.

"Especially after you have lost everything once and spent every cent to rebuild," she said.

"I just feel very grateful, after everything we've been through, to live here."

**'It wasn't a curse'**

Patrice Smith's New Orleans home was also destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, but 10 years later she doesn't have to look far to see several silver linings.



Patrice Smith, photographed with her husband Raymond, came to Lake County in September 2005 after Hurricane Katrina and now has a permanent home in Waukegan.

(Jim Newton / Lake County News-Sun)

With her two daughters, Jasmine and Deja, Smith evacuated Louisiana before the storm hit and moved in with relatives in Zion. Creating a post-Katrina life in Lake County, Smith met the man she would marry and helped build a new home for her family in Waukegan.

"I came here and gained a husband," she said Wednesday, smiling in a living room lined with family pictures. "It wasn't a curse. It was a blessing."

But it was certainly harrowing.

Smith and her girls left their home with only enough clothes for a few days because that was the usual hurricane drill before they could return home. This time, there was no going back.

"We lost everything," Smith said. "Everything was destroyed. There was nothing salvageable."

The worst part, though, was being unsure of her parents' safety. Smith finally connected with them through an online service, and the family flew to Chicago before moving in with relatives in Zion.

A few years later, a friend mentioned that Habitat for Humanity was looking to help Katrina families by building new homes. Smith applied, and after being accepted, she and her husband Raymond helped build their new Waukegan house.

"Habitat helped us out tremendously," she said.

The Smiths now live with the girls and Raymond's 7-year-old son Jshawn.

"The most important thing you have is your family. And you've got to stay grounded," she said. "We were always told, 'Stay grounded in God and he'll see you through.'"

Soon after moving to Lake County, Smith said she found a new church family and was able to get her girls involved in the community.

Smith has no thoughts of moving back, saying New Orleans has still not fully recovered "at the 10-year mark."

"I'll visit my family members there," she said. "But I think I found home."

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