



A THOUSAND MILES FROM HOME

After Hurricane Katrina, Jackie Clark found herself on a plane to Des Moines. She's made the most of it, but still feels...

New Orleans



Jackie Clark now lives in downtown Des Moines and volunteers at many events. "The people here have been good to me. But I was born in the South, I was raised in the South, and I want to die in the South," she says. CHARLIE LITCHFIELD/THE REGISTER

By Ann Hinga Klein
Special to The Register

Eight years ago, FEMA flew Jackie Clark out of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Longing for the world she left behind, she became one of Des Moines' best-known event volunteers. But she's still waiting for what she wants most: a way to get back home.

Late on a Wednesday in August, as a bluegrass band's final set rippled across the Des Moines River, a woman crossed Locust Street on a mobility scooter. Four of the six people working the Simon Estes Amphitheater entrance greeted Jacquelyn "Jackie" Clark by name.

"I was over at the State Fair parade on the other bridge," she said, "and I thought I'd come see if you needed any help before I headed home."

Home. The term hurts for Clark, 67, who has lived in downtown's Elsie Mason Manor since 2005, when storm-surge flooding associated with Hurricane Katrina devastated her city and forced the evacuation of approximately 1.5 million Gulf Coast residents.

Heartsick for the life she left behind, Clark turned to
See CLARK, Page 4E

In 2005 Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast displacing at least a million people and causing \$125 billion in damage. GETTY IMAGES

CLARK

Continued from Page 1E

Des Moines' entertainment scene, where she has since become known for her unflagging volunteer service and commentary on life as she sees it. Sometimes funny, sometimes poignant, her conversations inevitably come around to the evacuation that stranded her far from home.

Mark Schleifstein, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting in the Times-Picayune newspaper in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina, says Clark is not alone.

"There are still about 100,000 residents of New Orleans proper who did not return after Katrina," he said recently. "People went all over the place. Flights were picking them up and taking them out to wherever they could find a willing partner in a community, many of them far away."

'I had no car, and I had no money'

"So today is the eighth anniversary of Katrina," Clark said as she settled in at a table at Java Joe's in Des Moines' Court Avenue entertainment district. "The day before, Sunday, the 28th of August, was a pretty day, but the wind was blowing trash and papers. You could tell something was in the air."

Clark knew hurricane season the way Iowans know tornado season. She had moved to New Orleans from Georgia with her mother when she was 12. After high school, she signed up for Job Corps and landed in Clinton, Ia., where she completed a program in business. Like many New Orleanians, though, she'd found that most of her city's opportunities lay in serving and tending bar — work she liked — in the French Quarter's cafes and banquet hotels.

After her mother's death in 1972, Clark lived alone. In 2003, she moved to a seventh-floor apartment in the Mid-City neighborhood. Two months later, she broke her leg getting off a city bus.

Like 26 percent of households in the city in 2005, Clark didn't own a car. While that's hard to imagine in Des Moines, where the corresponding 2005 figure was 7.7 percent, it hadn't been an issue for her. She could get to concerts on the bus, which ran almost around the clock.

Watching TV before Katrina made landfall, Clark saw a slow line of cars leaving the city. "But I had no transportation, and I had no money because my disability check from the government wasn't coming in until the third. Where would I have gone, anyway? I was stuck there."

Clark was among 33 in



Jackie Clark, a Des Moines resident who was displaced from her home in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, volunteers at a booth at the World Food Festival in the East Village on Sept. 21. CHARLIE LITCHEFIELD/THE REGISTER

her building, and an estimated 100,000 in the city (pop. 455,188 in 2005) who stayed behind. "I had just bought up some fish, I had pork chops in the freezer, cat food for my cat, and some canned goods," she said. "I had my 13-inch TV that I had just bought at Wal-Mart and a radio that ran on a battery, and I had about 40 batteries."

She went to bed about midnight, getting up at 1 a.m. to look outside. Trees bent in the wind; debris tumbled down the street. She went back to bed.

'Bring everything you've got'

Roughly 75 miles northwest at the Louisiana State Police Emergency Operations Center, Frank Klier, assistant chief of operations for Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management, was on the phone, rounding up Black Hawk search-and-rescue teams from nearby National Guard units. "Bring everything you've got," he told them. "Fuel; everything."

Earlier that evening he had flown in to help, gathering in a "hunkered down" building with about 1,000 emergency management experts and decision-makers as the National Weather Service modeled the approaching storm. "I turned to the guy next to me, who was with the Guard in Louisiana," he recalled recently, "and I said, 'Is anybody here from New Orleans? Are they in this room?'"

"He said no. And I said, 'You think anybody's gonna tell them?'"

'The water just kept coming ...'

Clark's clock, operating on batteries, read 5 a.m. Tree limbs littered the ground outside, water had flooded first-floor dining and laundry areas, and the electricity was out, but gas and water services were on. She and her neighbors thought the worst was over.

"Then, at about 4 o'clock, I looked out my window and saw all this water coming down Tu-



THE REGISTER

lane Avenue toward the downtown section. I heard on the radio that the 17th Street levee had broke. The water just kept coming and kept coming."

Clark switched on the radio, finding a broadcast by talk-radio host Garland Robinette. "The only section of town he would mention was Metairie," she said. "It's where the doctors and lawyers and politicians lived. He never said one word about Mid-City. He wasn't talking about us because we were the poor section."

Over the next week and a half, Clark and her neighbors sat on their balconies, gathering provisions dropped by helicopter and watching others traverse the putrid waters by boat. In the distance, they could see a section of interstate. "They had put prisoners there because the police department had flooded out. You could see them in their orange suits."

On Sept. 8, a rescue team came inside, telling residents to pack for an evacuation. Clark could not swim, and she'd heard that pets were being taken from people's arms.

"What if I don't go?" she asked. "Where are you gonna take me to? Jail? There is no jail. Where are you gonna put me — on the interstate with the prisoners?"

The men said they would help with her scooter and her cat. She gathered some clothes and her birth certificate.

"They got me a box to put the cat in," she said. "I locked the door and said goodbye to the apartment, and I was crying."

The scene at the Convention Center took her breath away. "The same streets I had worked at were full of garbage and rolling carts and mat-

resses and crates — anything people could float on."

She boarded a bus. "Here came a man with a couple of puppies," she recalled. "Then a girl got on with two cats. You know how cats and dogs always fight? Not these. They knew something was up, too. It was a quiet trip."

At the airport, a man in uniform asked if she had anyone to pick her up.

"I said, 'No, but I'm going to sit right here at the airport until the water goes down and then go back to my apartment.' He said, 'You can't stay.'"

Clark made one request: "I don't want to go where it snows." Just after 8 the next morning, she and 16 others were told it was time to board. They filed onto a Delta jet.

They were in the air when the pilot made an announcement: "He said, 'Good morning, everybody. It's Friday, September the ninth, and we're on our way to Des Moines, Iowa.' I said, 'Oh, hell, I've been in Des Moines, Iowa.' Somebody said, 'Where is Iowa?' I stood up and turned around and said, 'It's in the Midwest and it snows.'"

Damage and recovery

Clark had a feeling: "With my income and no family to help me, once I got in a place, I was going to be stuck." That sense of powerlessness grew when her apartment manager in New Orleans told her the building had been looted. Her furniture, her TV, her keepsakes from Carnival banquets — everything was gone.

In late 2007, she received a letter from FEMA stating that a program was providing eligible applicants with up to \$4,000 to relocate. "I went to the C.I.C.L.L. [Central Iowa Center for Independent Living] place in the skywalk and used their computer to look up an estimation of how much the plane fare would be," she said. "They printed it out for me and I sent it to FEMA in the mail, but I never did hear back."

Speaking from the FEMA Louisiana Recovery Office in New Orleans, Program Coordination Specialist Megan Webbeking said the program ended in March of 2009, but her office continues to hear from people

VOLUNTEERING IN IOWA

Last year, Gov. Terry Branstad launched a public-private initiative asking Iowans to work an average of 50 hours annually on volunteer projects — toward the goal of making Iowa the national leader in service and volunteerism by 2015.

The average Iowa resident gave 41.9 hours in 2011. At the state's estimated volunteer value of \$17.55 per hour, Jackie Clark's 263 hours in 2012 would be valued at \$4,615.65.

Source: Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service

DISASTER'S COSTS AND CHALLENGES

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration called Hurricane Katrina one of the most devastating natural disasters in recent U.S. history. Flooding associated with levee failures in its aftermath covered 80 percent of New Orleans, causing more than 1,800 deaths and \$125 billion in property damage.

While the emotional effects of disaster and displacement are harder to calculate, psychologists have documented post-traumatic stress reactions including anxiety, depression, and a sense of hopelessness. Overnight, internally displaced people lose the social connections and communities in which they've invested their aspirations, built their dreams, found security and formed their identities.

In Katrina's aftermath, experts with the Brookings Institution suggested U.S. policymakers had avoided the United Nations term "internally displaced persons" and overlooked U.N. principles that call on governments to protect their most vulnerable citizens, making special efforts to ensure the full participation of IDPs in planning and managing their return home.

"I think the perception is that displacement happens in poor countries and countries struggling with conflict," Megan Bradley, a Brookings fellow in foreign policy, said recently. "It's the mark of a healthy society that support is available for people who need it."

VIDEO

Watch Jackie Clark describe how she feels about living in Iowa versus New Orleans at DesMoinesRegister.com.

my purse and they didn't get it, thank the good Lord. I don't let it bother me. They can't keep me at home."

In previous conversations, Clark had guessed that she volunteered at 50 events a year. Now, she produced a handwritten list. Even she seemed surprised when the volunteer numbers were totaled for 2012: 263 hours.

The conversation, as always, came back around to New Orleans.

"Every day, I sit up in this town of Des Moines, Iowa, wondering what I'm missing," she said. "The people here have been good to me. But I was born in the South, I was raised in the South, and I want to die in the South."

The conversation ended, as it has for eight years, without any real answers for Jackie Clark. She gathered her photos and placed them back in the bag, which she stowed in a basket on her scooter before heading out into the night, north to Elsie Mason Manor.



DES MOINES' HOLIDAY TRADITION

