

Hurricane Katrina Evacuation Story of Helen Zerlin Sperling

Interview with a New Orleans resident Helen Zerlin Sperling, age 78, about her experience during Hurricane Katrina in August, 2005.

This interview was conducted on May 5, 2007 by her daughter, Janet Zerlin Fagan, age 52, a New Orleanian now living in Newton, MA, while sitting in her home in uptown New Orleans, along with Helen's sister, Bessie Goldberg Speyer, from Tulsa, OK (originally from New Orleans) and in conjunction with Marilynn Galler Wohlstadter, middle daughter of Henry Galler.

My name is Helen Zerlin Sperling, and I'm a resident of New Orleans, Louisiana. I live in the Carrollton section in uptown New Orleans. I am a Katrina survivor and my daughter would like to record my story. My daughter is Janet Zerlin Fagan, now of Newton, MA.

On the morning of Sunday, August 28, 2005, I had heard that Hurricane Katrina was coming closer to New Orleans. I was in close touch with my friends Henry and Eva Galler, also elderly people like me. I was 76 at the time. Henry and Eva were in their early 80's. They were Holocaust survivors. So we weren't exactly young people.

We spoke to each other on the phone at around six in the morning and we decided we were not going to evacuate. We would wait out the storm at their house on So. Johnson St. in uptown New Orleans. I had gone to their house a couple of times during past hurricanes and it worked out fine. The main part of their house is on the second floor, so it had been a safer place to be in case there was a little flooding.

But at about 7am Sunday morning, Eva called me and said they changed their minds and decided to leave. Their plan was to drive their car to the home of their good friend Mrs. Mirel Rottersman near the lake and leave it there. Then they would all drive in Mrs. Rottersman's car to wherever we were going to go. They were planning to head towards Baton Rouge.

After explaining all this to me, Mrs. Galler said, "Helen, we're going to leave. Do you want to come with us?" I was astounded because I didn't think the storm was going to hit us so hard. So I thought for a minute. I was so close to saying no. But then I went and took a look outside and every one of my neighbors had gone. I didn't see one single car! I was really afraid to stay by myself. So I made a decision and said to Eva, "Can you please come and get me?" They said yes and that they'd be there in about an hour.

Quickly I packed a suitcase with two day's supply of clothing, toiletries, and a little food. I made sandwiches. I didn't think to clean out the refrigerator. I had fresh fish in the refrigerator and didn't even think about it. We were all sure we would be back in two days. I took the photo albums and put them higher up on the table. I also brought my cell phone and address book with all my important phone numbers.

The Gallers came to pick me up at about 8 am and we drove to Mrs. Rottersman's house. Henry and Eva parked their car there and we all got into Mrs. Rottersman's car.

JANET: When you were about to leave, you called me to tell me what was going on. We were away for the weekend on a trip to Olgonquit, Maine.

HELEN: Yes, I called my daughters to let them know I was leaving and was on my way to wherever; first to Baton Rouge, we thought.

JANET: You thought you were going to Baton Rouge? And where did you think you would stay?

HELEN: Henry was so sure we would get hotel rooms, but I knew we wouldn't. I just kept quiet. At least I was leaving New Orleans. But it's very scary, 'cause you're leaving New Orleans not knowing where your destination is.

JANET: Did they have cell phones, too?

HELEN: Yes, we all had cell phones. The cell phones were enormously helpful. We were all busy calling our children and various relatives. I'll tell you more about that later.

So we are on our way to Baton Rouge. By the time we got there it was slow, but not bumper-to-bumper traffic anymore. Most of the people had gotten away already. It was Sunday morning, the 28th. The hurricane was supposed to hit that night or early in the morning of the 29th. So we were already kind of late leavers.

While we were on the road we bought food. Finally we got to Baton Rouge. It was late in the afternoon. We stopped at three hotels, but of course, they were all booked up by this time.

HELEN: Each time we got back into the car, and continued on. At one point Henry said, "Maybe they're not giving us a hotel room because of my accent." (Laughing) Maybe they know I'm a foreigner. Helen, you go in and ask because you don't have an accent." (Mom laughs) So I went

into the next hotel knowing it probably wouldn't matter, and, of course, they didn't give me a room with my non-accent either!

We continued to drive west out of Baton Rouge toward Lake Charles. The women in the car all had bathroom problems, if you know what I mean, so we had to make bathroom stops. We would also get a little nosh to eat or a cookie or what have you. By now we were all exhausted. It was around 9 or 9:30 at night. None of the women wanted to drive. Henry was the only driver in the group, and I could see he was getting very tired and very aggravated, and who wouldn't?

Meanwhile I had called my sister, Bessie Speyer in Tulsa (originally from New Orleans) and said "Bessie, can you please call and get us reservations at a hotel in Lake Charles?" She didn't know if she could, but she worked hard and she did get reservations. However, she couldn't get them for Sunday night. They only had rooms available starting on Monday night.

BESSIE: Excuse me. I had to call several hotels before I could get one to say yes. One hotel said no, so I asked "Well, where else can you suggest for me to call?" They said to call a certain phone number. It was for the Isle of Capri Casino and Hotel in Lake Charles, LA. I called and they said they didn't have an opening for Sunday night, but they did have an opening for Monday night.

HELEN: So Bessie secured that reservation.

BESSIE: I reserved two rooms. I explained they were evacuating.

JANET: Explain what Murph did. Murph Singer is Eva and Henry's son-in-law, husband of Linda Galler, living in New York.

HELEN: We were approaching Lake Charles. I was thinking "I wonder if they have a synagogue in Lake Charles that could help us." In the meantime Murph called us. Murph had already gotten in touch with the Lake Charles synagogue, Temple Sinai. He called the synagogue but no one answered at first, so he left a message. Finally a man named Nathan Dondis, the president of the synagogue, called Murph back. He told him that there were four old Jewish people on the road from New Orleans. They are running away from Katrina and they need a place to go. Mr. Dondis told Murph to call him back in about three minutes saying, "I'll see what I can do."

Then we had what you might call a lucky break. When Murph called back in three minutes, the man gave him an address of an older Jewish couple, Si and Corene Davidson, whose kids were married. They said, "Come to our house." Murph and I had been on the same wavelength.

So eventually Murph gave Henry the telephone number of the Davidsons, who he called, and they directed Henry into their neighborhood. On the way Henry went right instead of left and left instead of right. It was a mish-mosh. It took us 40 minutes to get there.

Finally we came to the house! When we arrived this lovely couple was standing out there, waiting on the street and waving their arms that this was the place for us. The four of us got out. We kissed and hugged them. We didn't even know them! They said, "Come in! Come in!" They had a beautiful dinner for us to eat, including a beautiful salad and a bowl of fruit.

We all sat together and watched television. We watched the wind blowing, but we still had hope. We really thought we'd be in Lake Charles for one day and then go back. In the meantime, while we were all watching the news, they also gave us coffee and cake. Finally it was time to settle down for the night. Mrs. Rottesman and I stayed in one bedroom, and Henry and Eva had another bedroom. It was lovely; completely air-conditioned and comfortable.

The next morning their son-in-law, Bruce Katz, came over and made fresh home made blintzes with sour cream, soup, and just about everything you could think of. He was so cheerful and nice. They waited on us hand and foot. It was wonderful.

In the meantime we turned on CNN and saw them rescuing people. We watched the people getting rescued from their roof tops. The water was rising and we thought, "Oh my God! What do we do now? Where do we all go now?"

JANET: Had the levees broken yet?

HELEN: I don't think so, but there was enough water. I worried about my house on Nelson Street, and also about my rental property on State Street Drive. "This just can't be," I thought.

We watched this and didn't know how long all this would take. This family wanted us to stay. "Stay as long as you want", they said. That's the kind of people they were. But we thought, "Look at us. We're in this beautiful house. Some nice Jewish boy is making us blintzes. But we can't take advantage of them." And we did have a hotel reservation.

So we decided we were going to go to the hotel and from there we might be able to go back to New Orleans. We didn't believe the water would stay as long as it did. In the meantime we didn't know how to get to this hotel. It was quite a distance away. Mr. Davidson got into his car and had us follow him, and he led us to the hotel. That was so kind of him.

When we got to the hotel, it was packed with people everywhere! There were a lot of people there who were just like us. They had made reservations, but the hotel could not take them in on Sunday. A lot of weekend people were there, enjoying the happy weekend.

When we walked into the lobby, we saw crowds of men, women, and children. 60-70% of them were African Americans. We all spoke like we were brothers and sisters. There was camaraderie. Nobody thought about race. The hotel people worked on the problem of what to do with all these people. Many had pets with them, too. "We can't throw you out on the street," they said. People either slept in their cars or they slept in the lobby.

Eventually they gave us our beautiful set up for Monday night. We got two rooms across from each other. After we got settled in the room, we went to find some place to eat. The coffee shop was in the casino, so we had our coffee there.

Now long distance calls began all over again. This time Henry and Eva were on the phone with David Wohlstadter, husband of their daughter Marilyn, Janet's good friend, and they live in Dallas. We told him where we were. That night, Monday, we stayed at the hotel while David made arrangements to fly from Dallas into the Lake Charles airport, which is a small airport.

JANET: By now was it clear you couldn't go back?

HELEN: By this time we saw on Tuesday what had happened. We watched CNN. We saw that the levees had broken. We saw the horror scenes at the Superdome. People were crying, "Help me! Help me!" In a way these people were acting like animals. Mrs. Rottersman, also a Holocaust survivor, had been on a cattle car to Auschwitz during World War II. "That's exactly how we acted during the Holocaust. We turned into animals. If you treat people like animals, they turn into animals." Henry and Eva agreed. Mrs. Galler's words were, "I'm a refugee again. I don't have a home." We saw the photographers on the news, but we didn't see any help arriving for those poor people.

So here we are in this casino hotel and we know what's happening in New Orleans. All four of us felt very down. We're older people and we don't know how to make a change in life. We didn't know where we would wind up or where our lives were going. The Gallers got in touch with Marilyn and David to make plans about what we would do. We spent two nights in the Lake Charles hotel, Monday and Tuesday night.

Wednesday David flew to Lake Charles and rented a car to get from the Lake Charles airport to our hotel. We packed our few things and as soon as he got to the hotel we packed up the car. Henry drove Mrs. Rottersman's car back to the airport and David dropped off the rental car. We then piled into Mrs. Rottersman's car. Henry and David sat up front and the three women sat in the back. We didn't listen to the news, but David was telling us that the levees broke and most of New Orleans was a mess. We couldn't make conversation because we were kind of struck and frightened. Mrs. Galler said it was similar to when the war was over. She went back to her hometown and it was not the same. The relatives were not there. It was not the same. Neither she nor Mrs. Rottesman knew what would happen to their lives. They said this felt similar to getting out of the concentration camps. We were refugees. And I thought, "Now I am a refugee, too." It was one terrible feeling.

Anyway, David was wonderful and drove us all the way to Dallas. Here we are in the car again. He wanted to make the trip all in one day. So he drove and drove. Finally it was getting close to 11:00 at night. When we finally got to Dallas, he stopped at a kosher restaurant. David treated us all to a kosher meal. Then we went on our way again. By the time we got to Marilyn and David's house it was about 11:30 p.m. We'd been driving since about 11 o'clock in the morning! It was a twelve-hour drive! The grandchildren greeted us, Marilyn greeted us, and they did not know what to do for us first.

JANET: Quick question. Were you able to get gas? Was that a problem?

HELEN: No, it was not a problem. David and Henry left Lake Charles with a full tank, and we managed to get gas along the way.

JANET: Tell me now about your contact with Nancy.

HELEN: That was one terrible problem for me. I didn't know where my Nancy was. I wasn't getting any calls from her. We got to Dallas, they greeted us, and very soon after that I got onto the telephone trying to find out where Nancy was. I did talk to both Janet and Kathy in Boston, but we weren't yet able to get in touch with Nancy.

During the next morning I needed to make plans about what to do next. Mrs. Rottesman decided to fly to her children in Ohio. Prior to the storm I already had a ticket on Southwest Airlines to go see my sister and her husband, Bessie and Larry Speyer in Tulsa. That trip was planned for the end of September for their anniversary party. I called up Southwest Airlines and asked if I could use that ticket now instead. I explained, "I'm in Dallas and it's already paid for, and I'm a victim of Katrina. Can I use the ticket now to go from Dallas to Tulsa?" Thank goodness they said yes. So as it turns out I spent just one night in Dallas at Marilyn's house.

Both Mrs. Rottersman and I left the next day. Marilyn and David drove us to the airport at the same time. We said goodbye to Eva and Henry, and they stayed back at their house. I got on the plane to Tulsa. I hoped and wished that this wouldn't be for more than three or four days or a week. I had no clothing! But by that time we suspected it could be longer. We knew the news was not good. So I got on the plane and when I arrived in Tulsa I was greeted by my sweet sister Bessie. This was gonna be it for a while. I didn't know how long. I could not think past Tulsa. The only other thought was where is Nancy and her husband and her baby?

Back at Bessie and Larry's house, I got settled. Bessie managed to find extra clothes for me. I thought, "I am now a charity case. But, so what?" She also went out and bought me a whole bunch of new things: New pants, new underwear, all brand new things. She gave me some of her stuff. I thought, "Is this my life? Living out of a suitcase?" Some of her friends gave me clothes, I got clothes from everywhere. This is how refugees operate.

So now I'm living in Tulsa. It had been about 5 or 6 days but I still didn't know where my Nancy was. I'm trying to think clearly. Then, finally, Nancy got in touch with us! She finally was able to get through on her cell phone. She told me she had left Bambi's house in Picayune, MS. We did know that she went there first. But while she was there we lost touch. When she finally got through to me she said she left because they didn't have a generator at her friend's house. There was no air conditioning, Amanda, her baby, was bitten up by mosquitoes, and she was worried about her.

JANET: When she got to Baton Rouge 4 or 5 days later she was then able to borrow people's cell phones. I think you weren't in touch while she was in Picayune, Mississippi but when she got out of there she called me and she screamed, "We're free! We're free!"

HELEN: She explained that she was now in Baton Rouge in the B'nai Israel Synagogue. They had given her and her husband, Larry, and her 2-year old, Amanda, a separate room - a classroom - where they were allowed to sleep and eat. They also gave them diapers and baby food. When, Nancy and I first spoke, I said, "Nancy, Nancy we found you!" I had to call the Gallers because they knew how worried I was. I called them and I said, "We found her! We found her! She's in a synagogue in Baton Rouge!" So now they knew that Nancy was OK and I heard Marilynn and her mother screaming with joy! "Oh, that's wonderful!" I felt so good that they were really my friends, Marilynn and Mrs. Galler. I heard their joy on the telephone, and I don't think I'll ever forget those few minutes of hearing their voices, crying and laughing at the same time.

So at least Nancy and her family were physically well. She's also a resourceful person. And I knew that now that she was there with her husband and baby she would find a way through this maze, and through this awful time.

JANET: We also knew by then that her house in Pearl River was O.K.

HELEN: Yes, and I thought, "Thank God that her house is O.K.!" That was so important to me that she would have a place to go back to.

JANET: So let's go back to your story, Mom.

HELEN: Alright. So I'm in Tulsa and I am as blue and as sad as I can be. My sister doesn't like my looks. She says I look worn out and tired. She didn't like the way I was out of breath. I had a high anxiety level.

I continued to make so many phone calls. I tried to get in touch with my neighbors and there was no getting in touch with anyone. I tried to get in touch with one particular neighbor, Pete Sullivan, who is a carpenter who works for me all the time. He lives across the street. He helps me with all kinds of construction projects. I tried my great niece Sara Mayeux and her husband Ernesto Montano, cousins who also live on my street. I started calling the insurance companies because I had to let them know.

BESSIE: Everybody! You were on the phone day and night!

JANET: With FEMA, too!

HELEN: Yes, day and night. I needed to register with FEMA because they were giving money to evacuees (that was our formal name). Now I had no major income because my tenants left my three rental units. So I'm on the phone with FEMA and insurance, my kids and others - you name it.

I was also on the phone with my sister-in-law, Betty and her husband Louis Zelman, and with my brother and sister-in-law, Edward and Charlotte Zerlin, who were all safe at various homes of their children in Baton Rouge. They were in crowded houses with four dogs and I know I could not have gone there.

JANET: In Baton Rouge there was no flooding but there was wind damage so at that time they had no electricity either, and, of course, no air conditioning. Plus the roads were overcrowded because so many people had evacuated there.

HELEN: Right. And I was in Tulsa with wonderful air conditioning. Bessie and Larry waited on me hand and foot.

Now there was an important thing. As I said, I had heard on TV that I had to register with FEMA and I didn't know how to register. You had to go on the internet, and I didn't know how to do that. So during Labor Day weekend, Bessie took me to the Tulsa Jewish Community Center. Suddenly I was somebody they all wanted to see. I was a Katrina victim! At one point I was talking to this gentleman who was the head of the JCC. I said, "I don't know how to get on the internet and do all of this."

BESSIE: His name was Perry Simons.

HELEN: Yes. He gave me the telephone number of a social worker. He said I should go to this particular place and this social worker would register me with FEMA.

BESSIE: Excuse me. The social services agencies in Tulsa and other agencies such as local and national FEMA, Red Cross, Catholic Charities, Family and Children Services, and various others, had all gotten together in Tulsa in one location, a church, and there were announcements about this all over the TV and newspapers. Larry and I took you there the first time.

HELEN: Let me tell that part. The young woman there was already told that she would be taking care of a Katrina victim. That was me. She got on the internet and the telephone. She even used a speakerphone. Everyone was talking at the same time. They asked many questions and they gave suggestions. One thing they said was, "Save your bills."

We had bills from the hotel, from buying new clothing, and so on. If I gave them the bills they would do the rest and try to get me reimbursed. I was also told that the Red Cross was going to help, too. When you need help, you need help. You have to become a charity case and humble. My parents were charity cases when they first came from Europe. So, if that's the way it's going to be, I didn't care.

So Bessie and Larry, or sometimes just Larry, took me to this church. I got to the church and they took my name. They said "O.K. Go ahead. Walk in and just sit down. There were maybe 10 or 12 booths and one booth was for FEMA. I checked to make sure they had all the correct information. The next booth was to register for the Red Cross, and the next booth was Oklahoma Food Stamps.

This place was quite a distance away and not such a great neighborhood, but they took me and stayed with me and I think we hit every booth there. I really appreciated that they would do that for me. They also gave you medicine or prescriptions. If you needed a prescription they took your word for it, or you showed them a bottle of your medicine and they trusted you. I really appreciated that, too.

BESSIE: You didn't have to pay either. You went there several different times and registered with several different people. They all got to know her very well. She met up with other people from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. It was a gathering place where everybody commiserated.

HELEN: During all of this, everyone talked to each other. "What neighborhood are you from? Did you hear anything?" I live in the Carrollton section. One person told me, "I heard Carrollton was alright." The truth was that parts of Carrollton were alright and others were not.

BESSIE: When she was in Tulsa and continuing I'm sure in Boston, since the first day we took her down to get help, she was very savvy and persistent about her financial matters, about fixing up her houses, and just about everything. She was so resourceful and so persistent. She did not leave those people alone, whether it was locally or nationally. They all knew her when she called. But she had to be persistent in order to make any progress. It was so frustrating for her sometimes. I remember someplace you kept calling and calling the 800 number and it was always busy. So someone told her that in the middle of the night she might get through. So she got up and called them at 3:00 a.m. in the morning and she got through!

JANET: She was the true epitome of the squeaky wheel getting the grease. She was mighty brave.

HELEN: Thank you. I didn't always feel like going on and putting forth this effort, but I knew my problems couldn't sit on your heads forever, you know. I didn't feel like a heroine or anything. I thought I didn't have a choice. I had to do this. But I still envy Betty and Louis Zelman because they had to do it too but they had each other and they did it with such higher spirits. They lost everything but they didn't seem to complain. And they have finally received their money two years later from FEMA. Not enough; it's not enough. But it will help them rebuild their house and I know somehow they'll manage it. I managed it too but not with the smile that they had on their faces.

I want to add here that I had relatives going back and forth into the city. Sometimes the police wouldn't allow them to get into the city, and other times they were able to get in. My cousins were young strong men, like Ernesto Montano on my husband's side of the family, the Zerlin side, who went into New Orleans. He got a chance to look at my house on Nelson St. Thank goodness he saw that it wasn't flooded!

JANET: However, Aunt Betty and Uncle Louis Zelman lost their house to flooding. And many other relatives as well, Aunt Charlotte and Uncle Ed Zerlin, Marion and Joseph Cohen, Michael and Rachel Zerlin, and Neal and Hannah Kohlman, and Marilyn and Morris Brum, for example.

HELEN: Yes! It was terrible, I was so lucky that my house wasn't flooded! However, I own a piece of property on State St. Dr. That piece of property is part of my income, along with the upstairs apartment on Nelson St. and Social Security. I needed that piece of property! I managed to get in touch with Helen Kohlman, my first cousin, and she was saying her son Neal Kohlman and his wife Hannah lost his house on State Street Drive to flooding. That was quite near my rental property so I was suspicious. Finally through Pete or Ernesto, I learned that my duplex on State St. Dr. took in four feet of water in the lower apartment. And, of course, all the tenants flew the coop just like everyone else. They had to!

And the poor young girl, the tenant who lived in the downstairs apartment, had her grandmother's bed from the country. It was over a hundred years old. When she finally got in touch with me, and I told her that Peter Sullivan was fixing up the apartment. She asked about the bed. "Could Pete be very careful with the bed?" she said, "And have him make sure it dries up." Unfortunately I had to tell her what happened. "I hate to tell you this, Erin, but Pete said the bed was in sticks." Because it was such a treasured family heirloom, she said, "Oh no!" and started to cry. So many people lost sentimental items like that. My sister-in-law Charlotte Zerlin, lost her beloved grand piano that her family brought from Europe when she was a little girl.

Anyway, so I at least was feeling better about my house on Nelson St. But water did get underneath the house. It ruined the central heating system under the house, my hot water heater, which was outside in a shed, and my car. And of course the street had no electricity for quite some time. Plus my refrigerator had to be put out on the curb, along with everyone else's refrigerators in the city!

As it turns out, I spent almost four weeks in Tulsa. I tried to be cheerful, Bessie and Larry knocked themselves out; not just to feed and clothe me but to take me places and cheer me up. And their friends took me places.

BESSIE: Yeah, I remember she went to the beauty parlor, you know, she never paid. She would tell her story...

HELEN: I'll tell the beauty parlor story! So Bessie took me to Penney's, to their beauty parlor. I was just so full of misery it just came oozing out of me. And when the hair dresser asked, "Where are you from?" I said, "New Orleans." She said, "Oh no! Are you alright?"

Of course I said, "No. My income is gone, my job is gone, and it's a terrible situation from what I know." When it was time for me to leave I went to pay and the woman said, "You don't have to pay." I said, "What?!" What happened was the girl getting her hair done in the next chair overheard my story and she had paid for me! I couldn't get over that. I didn't tell the story so she would pay for me. Then the owners of the beauty salon said, "Here are free tickets for the next three weeks. You can come in and get your hair done free for the next three weeks." I don't go to the beauty parlor to get beautified. I go to wash my hair and get freshened up. A beauty parlor is a must for me. So I couldn't get over them giving me passes for three free hairdos!

I thanked them over and over. I was in tears because I was so touched! First I was astonished, I had to soak it up. The girl that was sitting next to me, I didn't think she was listening to me. I was talking to my beautician, not to her.

JANET: Was she already gone when you learned she'd paid for you?

HELEN: Yes! She finished about five minutes before me and I went to pay. That's when they said I don't have to pay because she already paid for me. So I couldn't even thank her.

That is what I found went on in Tulsa. People were ready to help you whether they knew you or not. And then another freebie was I needed more medicine. I take medication for my high blood pressure and

medication for my thyroid. When I went to Walgreen's I could order it. That's why I like Walgreen's because they have it all in the computer!

Time went on and Bessie and Larry took me to lunches. Bessie's friends were taking me out.

I remember one Friday night in particular, going to synagogue with some of Bessie's friends for Shabbat services. Something small happened, but I'll never forget it. I overheard two women talking at the temple. They seemed to be widows like me. I had lost my husband Maurice, in 1987, and I had lost Jac Sperling, my second husband. So I always felt lonely on a Friday night because I was going home alone from synagogue services.

Still Friday nights cheered me up. On Friday night for services at Temple Sinai in New Orleans, I would go with Betty and Louis, or with my friend Irene. But you know, I was often sad when it was time to go home because it meant going home to an empty house. So in Tulsa at the synagogue these two women were talking and they were enjoying the Oneg Shabbat. But soon they said to each other (one was the driver), "Well, let's go home now, I wanna get my clothes off and get into my housecoat and watch a little TV before I go to sleep." Suddenly I thought, "How normal!" I used to do that. I went with my friends or my sister-in-law and I would be sad because I would be going home to an empty house. Now I thought, "Oh my! Give me that empty house. Let me have that empty house to go home to where I can put on my housecoat, get a bowl of ice cream, and watch TV".

That little incident impressed me. I guess you feel sad that you have no shoes, until suddenly you have no feet! I was so appreciative of what the two women said because it made me realize how lucky I had been. Having that back was nowhere near for me. The city was still inundated with water, I didn't know what I had, or what I didn't have. But I was feeling one thing. I could no longer stay at Bessie's. A whole month was enough.

JANET: And that's when I came to see you. I came to see you and to attend Aunt Bessie and Uncle Larry's anniversary party because I hadn't seen you since the hurricane. The anniversary party was in late September. It was good to finally see you and to attend the wonderful party. I remember a funny story. At the luncheon you were wearing the same outfit as another woman there. It had been given to you by one of Aunt Bessie's friends I think. We all laughed and took a picture. Despite everything, we had a lot of fun at the party and honored their anniversary.

A week after that Aunt Bessie and Uncle Larry were going to be leaving town for one week.

HELEN: Bessie was trying to make plans for me not to be alone. While they were gone, I didn't feel comfortable driving in Tulsa. I had been in Tulsa almost a month. Janet and I talked and decided it was time for me to go to Boston. I would stay with her family in Newton, and also my middle daughter, Kathy lives there, too, so I could be with all of them.

So I packed up my all of my belongings that belonged to somebody else, got on the plane, and I went to Boston where my two daughters lived. Nancy, my youngest daughter, was pretty much OK by now. She was not yet working, and neither was her husband, Larry, but they were back in their house and getting their lives in order as best as they could.

It was already late September and I knew in Boston it would be getting pretty cold; at least for me. But I was hoping Boston would last less than a month even though we knew by now that the destruction that had come to New Orleans was an impossible situation. It was like a whole city destroyed.

I flew to Boston on September 30th I got settled up in the guest room on Janet's 3rd floor. And again Janet, Mark, and the kids were waiting on me hand and foot. Kathy came, too, and took me out. Janet also worked on my social life and getting me out a bit. She got me involved with the JCC and she got me involved with the Newton Senior Center. Her friends were outstanding, too. Janet, her husband Mark, and my 2 grandchildren Miriam and Abigail did have to go out of town for two different weekends. Kathy came and we were together, and Janet's friends from Temple Emanuel invited me to Shabbat dinners at their houses. They were so kind.

JANET: Yes, Monica Grinberg invited you the first time and her father was in town, remember? He loved hearing your stories.

HELEN: Yes. At the dining room table he even insisted on sitting next to me. He told his son and his grandson to move over!

JANET: Oh really! I didn't know that. He's a widower, I met him later on and he asked me about you. After you'd gone home, he asked me about your house and how it was doing. He was about 80, I was hoping maybe you would get together...(smiling)

HELEN: Oh yeah right! Anyway it was nice to talk and these people were very nice.

JANET: Ruth Tepper and her husband Jon had you over for Shabbat dinner also for the second weekend we had to be away. They came and picked you up, right? At the JCC there were Wednesday programs for seniors. There was a nice couple and their male friend whom you sat with sometimes and who brought you home and picked you up a couple of times.

HELEN: Yes, I went to lunches, dinners, and parties. You would think I was up there to have a ball.

I want to tell about going to Abigail's school.

While I was there, Janet arranged for me to speak at Jewish Community Day School where my granddaughter, Abigail was in 7th grade. I talked about my evacuation and about Hurricane Katrina to two groups of third and fourth graders.

JANET: We brought a map to show your evacuation route, and you told about how the synagogues helped you and Nancy.

Now these children were definitely ready for me. I spoke to them and they asked me all sorts of questions and the questions were very, very intelligent questions. These were very smart kids. They already knew what levees were and why they broke. They knew almost more than me!

During the talk, one child said, "My mother said this is all President Bush's fault." I looked at the teacher and the teacher looked at me kind of nervous because maybe she didn't want things to get too political. So I thought about how to answer this. I said, "You know, they asked the mayor whose fault this was and I said I think he gave the best answer. He said it was my fault, it was Congress, it was the President's fault, it was the Governors fault, it was the fault of the engineers and architects. It wasn't just one person who messed up there, but individuals, a whole government, a whole city system, the state of Louisiana, the federal government and the President who got us into this situation." I think that answer worked.

At the end of the talk I did one more thing that really seemed to interest them. Over the Internet someone had sent Janet these incredible photos. We made copies and I brought them to class for the kids to look at while I explained. They showed Beth Israel Synagogue, an Orthodox congregation in New Orleans, completely flooded on the inside with the seats floating and everything a mess. In these photos was a rabbi in hip length black rubber boots. He was at the shul with many helpers. They were in rowboats also, rowing through the dirty water. This special group came from Israel. They were searching to find the torahs and

prayer books. They came into New Orleans by helicopter, boat, and what have you to get into Beth Israel.

Beth Israel suffered greatly; the building, which was near Lake Ponchartrain, can never be used again. So these people were trying to rescue the Torahs. One photo showed the Rabbi up to his waistline in water, holding the Torah above his head. And I thought that to these children at a Hebrew day school this would show something. This would show the meaning to the Jewish people of our Torah because the Rabbi and his helpers were trying to rescue the Torahs, almost as if they were human beings. As it turns out they thought they had rescued one Torah, but it was ruined like all the others. So all the Torahs had to be buried.

Since that time Gates of Prayer, a reform synagogue, set aside their chapel for Beth Israel members to use and they are still using it. That was a very nice thing to do and an example of Jews of all kinds helping each other. Beth Israel eventually got a new set of Torahs with help from many, even with help from people all over the country. Beth Israel has been part of the New Orleans Jewish community since the beginning of the century. Even my own family went there years ago in the early 1930's when it was in downtown New Orleans, and later Janet went to Sunday school there as a young girl for a little while.

Anyway that was one of my activities and I enjoyed it very much.

JANET: It was great for the kids because they hadn't had a chance to meet an actual survivor of Hurricane Katrina. There was also an article and photos about you in the school's weekly newsletter, and they printed another photo and goodbye note when it was time for you to leave. The children wrote you lovely thank you letters after, and here is one letter that we put on the website for Katrina's Jewish Voices on the website of the Jewish Women's Archives:

Written to Helen Sperling by Gabi Shiner:

Dear Mrs. Sperling,

Thank you for coming to my class. The story was very interesting. I learned that it does not only mean that you need just shelter and safety to survive a hurricane, but kindness, generosity, and belief too. Thanks to you, now I know how it feels to be part of a natural disaster.

**Sincerely,
Gabi,
An Alon Student at JCDS**

HELEN: So I had been in Boston for about two and a half months. In late November I thought, "It's time to go home!"

Now my sister-in-law Betty and her husband Louis Zelman had been staying with their daughter, my niece, Susan Taylor and John at their home in Baton Rouge. Susan and John were happy for them to stay, but Betty and Louis didn't want to bother them anymore and I think they also really just wanted to go back home to New Orleans. It was like that for a lot of people. We talked on the phone and I offered for them to move my house on Nelson St. since it was OK. The street had electricity now and running water. Betty and Louis accepted the offer and eventually they moved in.

JANET: But you didn't yet have a hot water heater or a new heating system. At first it wasn't cold yet, so they could live without a heating system. However, the gas was not turned on yet, so they wouldn't be able to use the stove. These were not minor details, Mom.

I remember in order to bathe they had to use water warmed up in the microwave. One time I called to ask them how they were doing. Aunt Betty, who has a great sense of humor, said, "Just great if you like colonial living." They were troopers and were doing great, but still you could stay with us in Boston, and we didn't want you to go home until things were in better shape.

HELEN: Yes, but pretty soon it did get chilly and Betty and Louis were sometimes uncomfortable. And I really wanted to go home. I wanted to be home for Thanksgiving. I thought it would work well if I lived together with Betty and Louis. We could help each other out. Janet and Mark knew I kept talking about it. So then they came in with a list. My heart was sinking when I saw that.

JANET: We understood that you wanted to go home, but there were certain necessities that were very important. Do you remember what was on the list?

HELEN: I couldn't go home until all the things on the list were taken care of. I had to have gas and heat, and the stove had to be working.

JANET: Yes, and there were other important things on the list, too. Your car had been filled with several inches of water and since you couldn't go back and get the water out, the mold ruined it. So you needed a car, your doctors had to be back, a hospital had to be up and running, and we wanted you to have more neighbors around. And a hot water heater. Can you explain about the hot water heater?

HELEN: I was in touch with Pete Sullivan, my neighbor across the street who I sometimes call my rent-a-husband. He and his wife are so good to me. He is also my contractor. He managed to get back on to Nelson St. He talked to Betty and Louis and went over to the house. He found out what was needed. So I said to Pete, I want to go home, and my daughter won't let me go home until I have all the things on this list. I've got to have a hot water heater, gas, my central heat, and a car. There was also some wind damage on Nelson St. involving the roof and some windows upstairs. In other words the list went on and on and on.

JANET: Can Mark and I be absolved of our guilt, please? Our goal was we wanted you to be safe and have all the important necessities before you went home. Also, your situation was, as you know, not as critical as so many others. At least you had a home to go back to, yes?

HELEN: I know you were looking out for me. While I didn't want to hear it, with all my heart I knew when they came in I knew that the list of requirements that they had was absolutely reasonable. I had to buy a new car. There had to be places nearby to get gasoline and at the time there were hardly any places open.

JANET: You also had to have grocery stores. There were no grocery stores open. Sometimes Betty and Louis traveled long distances to get their groceries, even way out on Veteran's Highway where you don't like to drive. But we knew you needed to be able to go grocery shopping at Langenstein's.

HELEN: That's my little tiny grocery store near my house because I have a back problem. And then they pointed out that I had to have my doctors! And that's another reason I had to make a lot of long distance calls. You had to have a hospital. Our hospitals were not back in use yet. Doctors were not back. It was like, "Is this for real?" The whole picture was surreal. Now I knew that they were right and they meant well. But my heart still sank at the enormity of what was not back. Your doctors?! The gas stations, the cars, the grocery stores, your neighbors, they're not back?? And that was life in New Orleans.

JANET: We also discussed buying you a new car? Would we be able to get the car in New Orleans? Should we get the car in Boston?

HELEN: Eventually other families were slowly beginning to discuss going back home. Most of us elderly people need the doctors and hospitals to be functioning normally. So it meant wait, wait, wait. My heart was down in my throat. All I wanted to do was go home.

But finally, piece by piece, services started to come back to the city.

At some point I checked with all my main doctors, and they **were** coming back. They were reopening their offices and labs. So I remember joyfully telling Janet that news. I also called my heating man, Bird's Heating Co., and I said. "OK, the gas is on. When can you come and put in a new central heating system?" And he said, "OK, but you gotta send me a thousand dollars." Oy! Everything costs so much. We were lucky when Pete found a hot water heater. So many people needed a new one that they were impossible to find!

HELEN: I want to return to Betty and Louis for a minute. They found various grocery stores that were open, and they bought food that could be cooked in the microwave, since there was also no gas yet to use the stove. I have to say one thing about Betty and Louis. They are not complainers. If this is what happened then this is what happened. They lost their house to flooding! But they decided to go for it and renovate it. They're working on it now. It had to gutted because water stood in the house for about four weeks.

JANET: They're living in a FEMA trailer now.

HELEN: Yes. They came to live in my house and I was so happy that they would be there when I finally could go home. I told my kids and Bessie that I'm not so scared to go home with them there.

So finally the doctors were in place, the grocery stores were in place. Almost all of the things that Janet and Mark had put down on that list were in place and even the temple was now open Friday night.

JANET: Mom, can you add a few more details about your stay here in Boston. Tell a bit about Temple Emanuel in Newton and about Rabbi Wes Gardenswartz. And what happened the week before you went home.

HELEN: We went to shul on Shabbos quite a number of times. I got to know the rabbi and he really was great to me. He always came up to me to ask how I was. Monica Grinberg, a member, got me clothes.

The Shabbat before I left Boston, Rabbi Gardenswartz called me and Janet up to the bema. He said a special prayer for me. He told how I was going back home to New Orleans, and how they wished me well. I was a little bit of a celebrity by now. It was very nice of him.

But then again I don't think these people could picture what was really going on, because even I couldn't picture it! I would never have pictured my sister-in-law Betty and Louis and so many of my family members being homeless. It was one heartbreak after another.

I want to tell you all one other big heartbreak. Mr. Galler, the one who drove us out of New Orleans, wanted to go home and inspect his house.

MARILYNN: Near the end of September, about a month after the storm, Murph, my Dad, and I rented a U-haul truck and drove to New Orleans together. The city was closed, but we managed to appeal to the National Guard's sympathy and they let us through uptown to our house. We drove through destroyed and abandoned neighborhoods with trash and debris everywhere. It was like a war zone. There were still boats left in the middle of streets and cars parked on all the neutral grounds where people always put their cars during a storm to get them higher up. We didn't see any people at all.

When we finally arrived on South Johnson Street, we saw the shambles of our old neighborhood. The main floor was high up and escaped the flood water, but the whole foundation and basement floor of the house was in ruins. It was horrible. My dad was a tailor who had a shop. It was called Mr. Henry Custom Tailor on Jackson Ave. All of Dad's sewing machines were destroyed as was everything else in the basement. We salvaged what we could from the main floor of the house. It had not been looted, so we were able to take some furniture, clothing, and any valuables we could load up. We left before night fall, as there was no power in the whole area and we did not want to breathe the moldy air for too long. We left as quickly as we could.

Toward the end of October, Dad decided to return once more to check on the house and get more of their belongings.

HELEN: Eva, his wife, did not want him to come alone, and she wanted to go, too.

MARILYNN: We didn't want them to go, but they insisted and they both went anyway.

HELEN: So Mr. and Mrs. Galler drove home and saw their house. When they saw it they knew they could never come back to New Orleans. Mr. Galler had always talked about one day moving to Dallas to live, but Mrs. Galler wanted to stay in New Orleans and she had hoped to return after the storm. She liked her house and her friends. She was already very frail. She also wanted to go home because she liked her doctors. I'm sure her kids could get her the best doctors in Dallas, but they don't know you in a strange city. You have to start over. Everything in New Orleans was just familiar.

Every Saturday afternoon for almost twenty years since my husband Maurice died, she helped me get through my weekends. Her friends and I went to her house every Shabbos afternoon. She didn't cook but she kept the lights on and she had her coffee ready and we would schmooze and talk. We just had a good time together and I always felt better after I left her house.

JANET: While in New Orleans, Eva and Henry salvaged everything they could. According to Marilyn, when Eva went back to Dallas, she seemed to have made peace with the fact that they were leaving home. She even seemed to be more cheerful.

MARILYNN: While in New Orleans they stayed with Mrs. Rottersman, her best friend, who had returned to her undamaged apartment. So it was a closure of sorts.

They were there for about a week, during which she had to go to Ochsner Hospital's emergency room for a swallowing problem. The hospital was crowded with a lot of sick people and she had to stay in the waiting room most of the night before seeing the doctor. It was the only hospital open in New Orleans.

JANET: Eva began to get sicker a week or so after returning, and just couldn't seem to get better. Marilyn thinks she may have been affected by the mold that was in the air while they worked in the house. They were in the house for hours, and they didn't want to wear masks while they were there.

MARILYNN: On November 15, my birthday, Mom could not get out of bed and I had to call 911. She never again became fully conscious, and in early January she died in Dallas.

JANET: My mother was back in New Orleans and could not handle going to Dallas for the funeral. Because Marilyn and I were such good friends, I went to Dallas to the funeral by myself. It was a very small funeral, quite unlike if it had been in New Orleans before the storm. Plater Robinson from Tulane's Southern Institute was one of the few who did come from New Orleans for it. I never realized that for years and years, with the help of Plater, Mr. and Mrs. Galler, and especially Eva, traveled all over the south talking about their experiences during the Holocaust. Plater, an incredible fellow, drove her to schools in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, etc., so they could tell their stories to the students. It was Plater who delivered the first eulogy.

When we were young girls, Marilyn and I spent time writing poetry together, often in that basement that was now flooded. When her mother

was sick and they knew she could be dying, I happened to come across a folder of our old poems, both hers and mine, typed on my electric Smith Corona typewriter. One of those poems, written by Marilyn was absolutely beautiful, and it is called "Mama." When we spoke next, I reminded her of it. She looked and still had it as well. She decided to read it at the funeral. I was touched when she acknowledged me for reminding her of it.

Here is the poem:

Mama

by

Marilynn Galler

Mother's Day, 1972

She'd always care
'Bout what we'd wear
And combed our hair
And tied our shoes
And read us news
And healed our flus
And soothed our fears
And smacked our rears
And dried our tears
And made our beds
And kissed our heads
And baked us breads
And cooked our meat
And warmed our feet
And called us sweet
And praised our best
And signed our tests
And fed our guests.

How do I now bestow
Enough love
Upon her who sure
Lived to give us
Life?

Losing Eva was a great loss to her family, to our New Orleans community, and to you, Mom.

HELEN: Yes. In fact, a lot of older people, Jewish people that we know and people that we didn't know died shortly after Katrina in other cities. The obituary page was full and still is to this day, of people who were from New Orleans but passed away elsewhere. The paper says, "Living in Baton Rouge since the Hurricane," "living in Shreveport since the hurricane," "living in Dallas since the hurricane." In a way, they were also hurricane victims. Months later there was a memorial service for Eva here in New Orleans and Rabbi Goldstein said she was a hurricane victim, a Katrina victim. And that's what most of the Rabbis said as well.

JANET: So shall we continue on with the story? Do you recall that just before you left we threw a little surprise good bye party at my house for you. We wanted to do it, but we knew you wouldn't agree knowingly, so we decided to surprise you. Tell a bit about that.

HELEN: It was a combination birthday party/goodbye party. My birthday is December 11th, and I was leaving on the 16th. The party was in the middle of those two dates. I was completely surprised and absolutely shocked when I walked in. Kathy took me to dinner and that's when they got everything ready and all the people came. There were the friends from the JCC, and the people who had me for dinner, and even Effie, Janet's seamstress, who I visited a lot and we got friendly.

JANET: My friends Pat Freysinger, Nancy Krieger, and others, too. Some of them brought presents, and we had signs up. They said, "Good Luck in New Orleans!" and "You're going home to your own chair." Here's the poem I read out loud to you. The poem is framed now and is on your wall here in New Orleans:



Shalom to Helen/Mom/Bubbie and Thanks to You All

Helen is going back home to the South,
Back to her chair and her well-loved house,
Back to warm weather, no snow or ice,
Back to New Orleans, no need to think twice.
Back to extended family and friends,
Back to Nelson Street where her long journey ends.

We all wish her well, good luck and good wishes,
She'll be on her own; now she'll do the dishes.
She'll have to make do with our city in pain,
But she's tough and can do it while they rebuild again.

To all of you people in this room so bright,
(and also to some who can't be here tonight,)
We thank you so much from the bottom of our hearts,
For all of the kindness you did impart.
Though her time was fraught with calls and tough news,
You helped make her smile and forget her blues.
You fed her and clothed her, you cooked and you drove,
You schmoozed and you listened and made the time flow.

And Mom, you did so much to share, too,
You sewed on some buttons, you made matzah ball soup,
You spoke to children at JCDS,
Though we often weren't easy and could even be pests,
You told us stories, and did your best.
You kept your humor, and didn't get mad,
You tried to be cheery and not often sad.
As you acted as guest, mom, Bubbie, or friend,
You did a great job, you tried hard to bend.
So Mom, Bubbie, Helen, as we say our goodbyes,
We also thank you for touching our lives.

Now she's ready to go, we've set the scene,
We send you with love, off to New Orleans.

Janet Zerlin Fagan, December 13, 2005 - Newton Highlands, MA

JANET: We got tickets for Mark, my mom, and I to go to New Orleans on December 16th, 2005. Mom and I flew together alone, and then Mark met us later that night. When we got to the airport we were picked up by Gail Pesses.

HELEN: Oh Gosh, Gail picked us up at the airport and she did such a nice thing. She took us to a warehouse where Hibernia Bank was keeping flooded safety deposit boxes, our iron boxes. And my important papers were in the iron box. Many important papers were in the metal box. And also my diamond engagement ring and wedding band set that Maurice had given me. The value had gone up about ten times since we had been married. And I thought please let that be there. And it all had gotten drowned, I could save very few papers from there but my ring was still in its little box.

JANET: I'd like to add this warehouse was near the airport. Gail, a single mother whose house was flooded, who lost so much, and was now in a FEMA trailer with her kids, was kind enough to pick us up and take us to this warehouse. We were required to put on special outfits, gloves, and masks before we could inspect her things.

HELEN: The ring was OK. They put the ring in a special plastic thing because it could be covered with whatever if was covered with and I did take the ring home. And we put all the wet papers in a plastic bag. They told me to let them dry out in the sun. And I called up a jewelry place, about how to clean the ring. I put it in sudsy water and a used a little peroxide and it looked fine. Then I gave it to Janet to bring home and keep safe in Boston.

JANET: So Gail picked us up and we came home to your house on Nelson Street. Mark came in later and we began to take care of all the little business tasks. Mark took you to buy a new car, didn't he?

HELEN: Yes. He took me all the way to Algiers. I bought a Ford. He was very helpful. Thank you to Mark for everything you did for me.

JANET: We were here with you for three or four days and we all worked. Pete Sullivan and Aunt Betty and Uncle Louis had helped to make the house livable so that it was in good shape when you returned. Aunt Betty and Uncle Louis went to Baton Rouge, but we got to see them before we left.

So life started over in the "new" New Orleans. Lots of phrases became popular like, "Ain't dere no more." But you continued to live your life here, right? You seem to be doing OK. We're very proud of you, Mom.

HELEN: Thank you. I'm thankful my sister and daughters saw something good in me.

So now I can go back to my familiar Friday night services at Temple Sinai and I talk to Irene or Betty. When it's time to go, I drive home, get into my housecoat, eat a bowl of ice cream, watch TV, and I certainly do appreciate it and I'm glad to be back. For the first time in my life, being alone isn't all that bad. At least my surroundings are what I knew. So I treat myself a little better and I appreciate my surroundings a little more. I hope I can keep my health and continue to go on living in New Orleans. Good luck to all of us!

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