



Navarre Powe (far right) with her mother, Alva Ellis, her daughter, Margan, 13, and her son, Romeo, 11, in their Houston apartment. Below: New Orleans after the levees broke.



STARTING OVER

NEW ORLEANS: DAVE MARTIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS. FAMILY: F. CARTER SMITH.

**KATRINA EVACUEES
FACE A BRAND-NEW LIFE,
AND THE ONLY THING THEY
KNOW FOR SURE IS THAT
THE FUTURE IS UNCERTAIN**

AS TOLD TO JEANNINE AMBER

Nearly a quarter of a million New Orleans residents lost their homes, jobs and even family members and friends when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans last August. Forced to flee the storm and the devastating floods that came after, they had no idea where they might land. To date, about 189,000 of those who left have returned. The rest are still scattered across the country

trying to put a life back together from scratch. ESSENCE senior writer Jeannine Amber spent six months following three of the displaced families. She talked to a mother struggling to feed her children in Houston, Texas; a young man looking for work in Fort Smith, Arkansas; and a dentist trying to rebuild the family's dream home in New Orleans. Here, in their own words, are their stories.

Nothing but the Rent

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, an estimated 200,000 evacuees from New Orleans flooded the city of Houston. For Navarre Powe, 32, who evacuated with her ailing 57-year-old mother and two children, the city at first seemed like a paradise filled with people willing to help. But as the months wore on, she began to see things a little differently. She watched the news reports of local high-school students fighting with the kids from New Orleans. She agonized over the way her children covered under the blankets every time the weather report predicted rain. She fretted about her mother becoming more and more housebound without the electric wheelchair that had allowed her to get around in New Orleans. And, of course, she couldn't stop thinking about the rent. Sooner or later, she knew, FEMA was going to stop paying for their apartment. Her mother would joke about selling their things to the pawn shop and living under a bridge. But for Navarre, the weight of not knowing how she is going to keep her family safe and sheltered in a new city is almost too much to bear.

Navarre: Even when we lived in New Orleans, I used to worry about my children. In 1997 my oldest child, Star, passed away from a brain tumor. She was 5 years old. In the floods that came when the levees broke after Hurricane Katrina, I lost every photograph I ever took of her—the first day of school, her baby pictures, everything. People say you'll always have her in your heart, but I don't have her tiny wheelchair or the dress she passed away in or the tape of her at Disneyland. It was the last time she really smiled, and it's gone. ▶

After Star passed, I became very protective of my other two children. My son, Romeo, is 11, and my daughter, Margan is 13, and I homeschool them both. We didn't evacuate before the storm hit because we didn't know until the day before that it was mandatory. By that point, everyone who could have given us a ride was already gone.

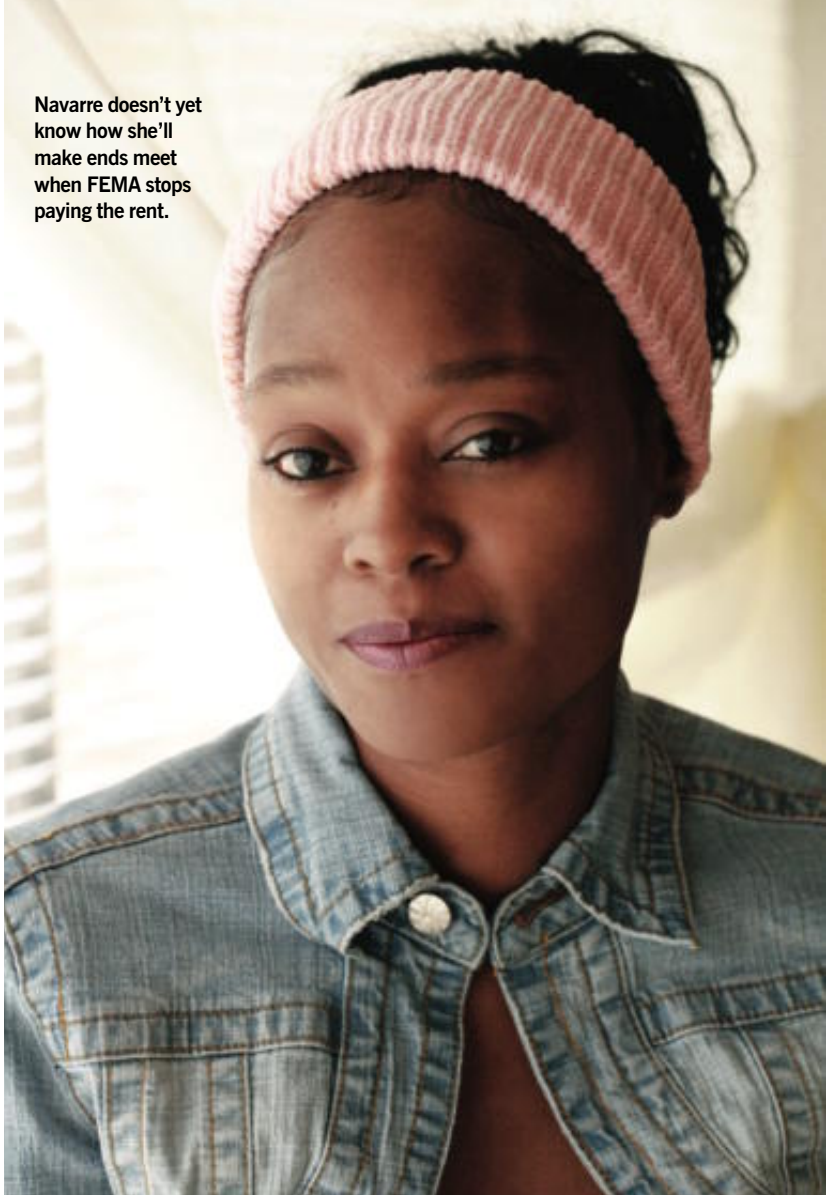
I remember around six in the morning my son woke me up. Outside, the water was everywhere. We knew we had to get out of the apartment, but when we opened the door, the water just poured in. Finally we managed to push the door open and made our way to the stairs that led to a vacant apartment on the second floor. The water was up to my daughter's chin. My mother had been using an electric wheelchair because her arthritis is bad, so I was literally dragging her up the steps.

We were in that vacant apartment for four days. One of the days some men in a helicopter yelled down that they couldn't rescue us unless we got to the roof. They actually said that if we didn't get up there, they'd just throw down some body bags and we could zip ourselves in. But how was I supposed to get us onto the roof? There was no furniture to stand on or anything to break through the roof with. I was sure we were all going to die. Eventually someone with a boat took us to higher ground, then we were flown by helicopter to a freeway in Jefferson Parish.

I hear people talking about how they can't wait to go back to New Orleans. But there isn't enough money in the world to make me go back there after the way we were treated on that freeway. There were thousands of us behind a barricade being watched by military police who pointed rifles at us. The whole time I was begging for a wheelchair for my mother. I was told they were saving the wheelchairs for the sick. But the next day some White people came, and they gave them two wheelchairs. Two! These people seemed perfectly healthy and had arrived by car, so you know where they came from hadn't flooded. And yet I couldn't get a wheelchair for my mother, who was in pain and couldn't even walk.

From the freeway, the buses took us to the Houston Astrodome. We've been in this apartment in Houston since October 4. This man, who used to come to the Astrodome to talk to evacuees, helped us find it. I wouldn't mind staying in Houston, just not in this area. If I bring one of my kids with me to take out the trash, young

Navarre doesn't yet know how she'll make ends meet when FEMA stops paying the rent.



food. Sometimes I swallow my pride and ask our neighbor for some hot dogs or something I can give the children.

I worry about my mom and wonder how I'll be able to afford her medication or get her a new wheelchair. And I worry about my children. Last week my daughter said she felt like she wanted to go in her room and just stay there. And Romeo, he's started wetting

“It's like being frozen in a bad dream. The more you try to wake up from it, the worse it gets. People think we're supposed to be okay by now. But we're not okay. We're just not.”

people outside are smoking marijuana and cursing. I've never had my children in this kind of environment before. Still, I won't complain because I'm afraid they'll tell FEMA we aren't good tenants.

Since we got here, they've been talking on the news about FEMA cutting off the rent vouchers. I don't know where we will go if that happens. Right now we live on \$1,200 a month that my mother and I collect for disability. That goes for food, our washer and dryer, my mother's medicine and the kids' school supplies. There have been times we didn't even have enough

the bed. I'm not doing too well, but I keep it to myself because I don't want to upset anyone. A doctor recommended I see a psychiatrist, but I don't know how to get to the clinic. I'm so afraid of getting lost and having no one help me, so I just stay by the house.

I've thought about going back to school or getting a job, but who would take care of my mother and the kids? Mostly I'm just at a standstill. It's like being frozen in a bad dream. The more you try to wake up from it, the worse it gets. People think that we're supposed to be okay by now. But we're not okay. We're just not. ▶



Wilfred (center) with his parents, his two children and his adopted siblings.

The Promised Land

As with many other cities across the South, Fort Smith, Arkansas, a midsize industrial town northwest of Little Rock, welcomed Katrina evacuees, offering food, shelter and jobs. But as the weeks dragged into months, some Arkansans found their hospitality wearing thin. “We didn’t have a ghetto until the people from New Orleans got here,” one cab driver said. “Now I see a lot of them just sitting, waiting for a check.”

This is the town that Wilfred Jackson, his mother and stepfather, and their two young adopted children, now call home. Despite growing tensions between townsfolk and the new arrivals, Wilfred, 20, is determined to look on the bright side. As far as he can tell, Fort Smith might be the best thing that ever happened to him.

Wilfred: A lot of people here don’t really trust us. They’re always trying to figure out if, being from New Orleans, you’re gonna be wildin’ out and acting crazy. Wherever you are—in the mall, in the club, on the street—they just don’t take their eyes off you. But I’m not trying to get into any trouble.

After I got here, I had a job in the hardware department at Sears, but it was just seasonal, and after Christmas they let me go. They said I was a good worker, though. Since then I put in applications at JCPenney, Dillard’s, KFC, the Gerber baby food factory they have here, all over. I need to get a job before our FEMA rent voucher runs out later this year. I have my two kids to take care of. They live with their mama and grandma back in Slidell, Louisiana, but I have them stay with me every two months. And I call them every day.

I was so angry the day the levees broke. I kept telling my parents we needed to leave, but they didn’t think it was going to be so bad. But >

Wilfred's children, D'alyiah, 3, and Darius, 1, live with their mother but visit often.



then we were all in the house, the children were on top of the highest cabinets, and the fridge was floating off the floor. My mama didn't want me to break the window, but I did it so we could yell for help, and finally someone came by with a boat. Not someone official, just some regular dude who stole a boat. He took us to another house that had a second floor porch, and we waited there for a day or so, with about 14 other people, until some rescue workers came. They took my mama, my stepfather (who's on dialysis) and the children. One of

them said he was going to come back for me, but he never did.

Then it was just me and another dude and some old guy with teeth missing, waiting on this porch. Night was falling, so I decided to break into the house next door and get some things. I got socks and some T-shirts and some macaroni and cheese. They also had a battery-operated radio, and it was saying people in New Orleans were drowning and dying and it was chaos. But I was in a house with 20 feet of water, so I already knew that.

The next day another dude with a boat came by and took us to a bridge on Interstate 10. There were people all up and down the highway, with a bunch of other people walking in from the east. They had bags of shoes, clothes, food, hats, drinks, and some of them were pushing shopping baskets and selling stuff like cigarettes and chips. They said they got stuff from the Gentilly Woods Mall, which was nearby. So I went there, too.

I got myself some G Unit sneakers, some Deion Sanders sneakers, a Tupac T-shirt, some jeans. I didn't know when I was going to be in a situation where I was going to get some clean clothes again. I also got some candy and some water.

Superdome. I was there a couple of days, and then I got on a bus that took me to Houston.

I finally found my parents by computer. Someone at the Reliant Center in Houston looked up their name and told me they were in a church shelter in Cypress, Texas. I took a taxi there. It cost \$90 of the \$900 I had gotten from the Red Cross. But by this time Hurricane Rita was coming, and we had to evacuate again. The people from the church shelter put us on a plane that took us to Fort Chaffee army base in Arkansas. Some other church people met us and took us to these apartments. That's how we ended up in Fort Smith.

When we first got here, I was really lonely. I didn't know anyone. It was like Bourbon Street on a Saturday night: You didn't see a single Black person. I was like, *Damn, I gotta get used to this. I gotta make it all gravy.* I have lots of plans. My main goal is to get my GED. I'm in a program now. Then I'll go to tech school to study electrical engineering and stuff. I also hope to rap or play in movies and sitcoms and stuff. Or be a businessman or a psychiatrist. Two or three of those things.

I just took a test for a job at Taco Bell. They ask you all kinds of questions, like what would you do if a customer started

“When we first got here, I was really lonely. I didn't know anyone. It was like Bourbon Street in New Orleans on a Saturday night. You didn't see a single Black person.”

Before this I never robbed anyplace, but it was a hurricane situation, and I believed the store owners had some insurance. What I really wanted was a camcorder so I could record what was going on.

When I got back to the bridge, I changed into some dry clothes, and I gave some of my candy and water to the old people sitting there. I slept on the bridge for a night. Then some guys in a Mustang gave me a ride to the Louisiana

cursing you out? I don't really want a job at Taco Bell, but I've got to take care of my kids. My mother, she just wants to go back to New Orleans. But I always wanted to see other places. I like it here because it's just peaceful. Where I came from, everybody's just down and out. People had the attitude like, "I ain't gonna be s---, so I might as well just do whatever I can get away with." But I'm not like that. I'm going to be somebody. Being here, now I have a chance to try. >

TAMARA REYNOLDS

A Mighty Wind

New Orleans today is filled with the stark and startling contrasts of a city trying to rebuild itself. There are impoverished neighborhoods of flattened homes, overturned cars and uprooted trees, where every block is overrun with quickly made signs advertising mold removal and home demolition. Just a few miles away on higher ground sit the majestic, multimillion-dollar old-money homes of the Garden District, many of them virtually unscathed by the storm. Some neighborhoods are now completely uninhabitable, yet on historic Bourbon Street revelers dance as if nothing ever happened. And then there are the quiet communities like Eastover, where people worked hard for everything they had and then watched it get washed away. This is the community to which Wanda Augillard, 41, her husband, Terrence, 42, and their three children are determined to return.

Wanda: Before Katrina, my husband and I had a dental practice together in Gentilly, and life was good. We really enjoyed our work, and over the years we'd gotten ourselves into a good financial position. Our three girls, Kerstin, 11, Erika, 9, and Mia, 7, were all in private school, the bills were paid, and we were living in a house I'd literally been dreaming about for almost 15 years.

I saw it showcased in a magazine when we were still in dental school, and I cut out the floor plan and saved it. It was 7,200 square feet with five bedrooms, a home theater, a playroom for our three girls and an outdoor cooking area. My husband had an office, and I had a scrapbooking room. We built it right on the first hole of a golf course in a beautiful gated community. We finished construction just three years ago, and we were told our house could withstand a category 3 hurricane. That's why we almost didn't evacuate.

Every hurricane season we're told to evacuate, and usually we just stay home. I was thinking, *Why sit in traffic for 12 hours and then just turn around and come right back when all that's going to happen is the rain is gonna fall and the wind is gonna blow?* But by Sunday afternoon, things had started to look pretty bad. >

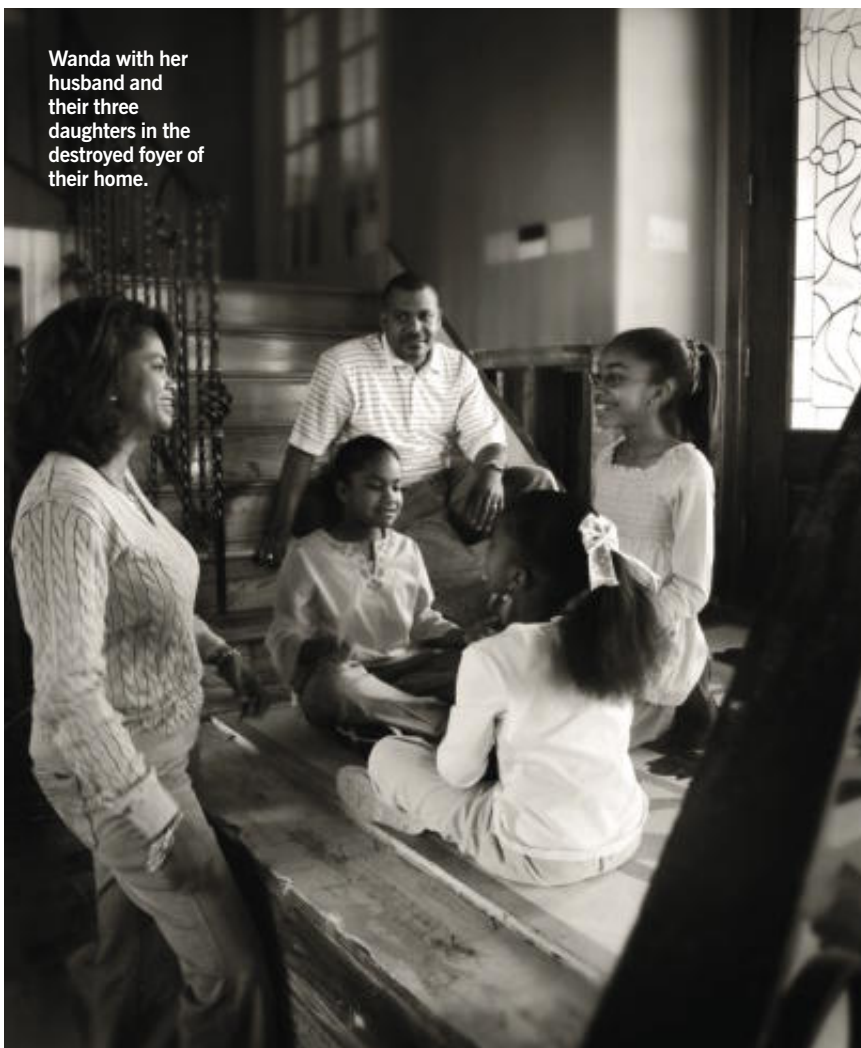
Wanda Augillard stands in what was once the kitchen of her dream home.



I packed enough for two days, and we left in a caravan with our in-laws and our neighbors. We drove up to Little Rock to stay in a hotel. I left everything in the house as if we were coming right back. All my good wedding china was still set on the dining-room table.

On Monday we watched the news and said to ourselves, *Oh, see, we could have stayed. We would have been all right.* Then on Tuesday the levees broke. Our neighborhood isn't near the Lower Ninth or any of the other places that we saw on the news. We were thinking that this is so horrible for all those people. It was about four days before we found out our subdivision was under water, too. There was five feet of water in our home; it took two and a half weeks to recede. Everything on the first floor was destroyed. We had to gut everything. Imagine standing at your front door and everything—all your hard work, everything you sacrificed for—is gone. You just feel violated.

Since Katrina, we've been renting a three-bedroom house in Lafayette with our neighbors and their two children. Every morning, the first thing my husband does is make a list of what we need to do and who we need to follow up with.



Wanda with her husband and their three daughters in the destroyed foyer of their home.

“Every morning, the first thing my husband does is make a list of what we need to do and who we need to follow up with. You don't realize how much it takes to get your life back in order.”

You don't realize how much it takes to get your life back in order. We banked with a local Black-owned bank and it was flooded, so for months we didn't have access to our money. We had to stand in a lot of lines to get help from the Red Cross and the Salvation Army and FEMA. For several weeks we were on food stamps, which was a new experience. I remember standing at the checkout line and the cashier asking me for my PIN, and I didn't know what she was talking about.

But as much as we went through, it's not losing the material things that really upsets me. It's missing the way our lives used to be. We have many really close friends whose homes were completely under water. They just took their insurance money and paid off their mortgage, and they aren't coming back. There are phone calls now, but you know soon it's just going to be Christmas cards and that's it. Sometimes I just feel as if I can't take it anymore, and that's when my husband and I get in the car, go for a drive, and I have a good cry. I can't break down in front of my kids after I've told them everything's going to be okay. We know we're fortunate to have a home that

can be rebuilt and insurance to help us pay for it. But even for people in our position, there is still so much uncertainty.

I also really worry about my patients. I just hope wherever they are, they are being taken care of. I'm one of the few Black female pediatric dentists in Louisiana, and I served many Medicaid patients. Some are autistic or mentally disabled. These were children other doctors didn't want to be bothered with. But these were my people. I'd seen some of them since they were babies. New Orleans was a very family-oriented city. One day a patient would come in with his mother; the next time his grandfather or his aunt would bring him. Now I don't know where all those families are. We've all just been scattered to the wind. □

Jeannine Amber is senior writer for this magazine.

For monthly updates on what's going on in the rebuilding efforts, see Katrina Watch in the Our News section. To read previous Katrina coverage, visit essence.com.