

Hurricane Katrina – August 29, 2005

(Mike Gosselin, Dave Bennett & Melissa Meredith)

Sunday 3PM:

We are driving along the coast in Biloxi looking for a hotel/shelter where we can ride out the storm. The weather is partly sunny, hot and humid. We stop at a few places that look sturdy and are still open. We can't get a room anywhere. Finally we find a place called the Edgewater Inn right on Highway 90.

The receptionist says she has one room left (even though the parking lot was nearly empty) and that the gov't rents the place out during hurricanes as a shelter for gov't employees. She informs me that the hotel made it through Hurricane Camiel (category 5 - 1969) and sits twenty six feet above sea level.

Sounds like a safe place to me? I'll take it!

The only bad news was that we would have to check-out at noon because they had no rooms available.

We go to our 2nd floor room and get situated. Then off to find an open store to get a few supplies.

Sunday 10PM:

Dave and I decide to go for a drive around town. There are some stronger wind gusts now (20 / 30 MPH) some sporadic rain here and there. The town looks abandoned. Windows boarded up, lights off. A storm coming.

We go back to our hotel/shelter and watch the weather channel and some other local news stations. We eventually fall asleep.

Monday 6AM:

I wake up hearing rain hitting our window. There's already a dripping sound. Rain was getting into the seals on our window. It's not bad though. I look outside and the wind is really blowing or so I think. The rain is coming down pretty hard. Power is still on. Dave wakes up and we flip on the weather channel... or maybe it was still on, I forget.

7AM:

It's getting light out. Pouring rain now and bigger wind gusts. The storm is just getting to New Orleans. The power is still on but has flickered a few times. We fill the bathtub up with water so eventually when the plumbing stops working we will have water to flush the toilet. Good thinking Dave.

9AM:

Very strong winds outside and heavy rain. Gusts are probably close to 100 MPH with a sustained around 70 MPH. We look out the door and can see the ocean lapping up into Highway 90. The power has flickered a few more times and eventually goes out, here we go.

10AM:

I am staring out the window as the wind and rain continue to build. The ocean has reached our parking lot. White caps are breaking right about where our room was. The wind is probably constant over 100 MPH now and gaining. The actual hurricane isn't even there yet. The Edgewater Inn sign is starting to break. A piece fly's up over the building. Then the rest of the sign goes.

Water is getting blown in through the bottom of our door and the window has a steady stream of water pouring from it, like a faucet left on. We have a table wedged up against the air

conditioning unit because the wind keeps blowing it out of the wall into our room. Gusts of wind are also blowing water right through the vents.

10:30AM:

More wind. The ocean is getting deep in the parking lot now. This wasn't supposed to happen? I hope our car is alright parked around the corner in a safe place, or so we thought. I get up and come back and as soon as I look out the window the brick south wall of the three story building where the main office is collapses to the ground! Furniture from the office storage area and rooms are tossed all over.... This definitely was not supposed to happen. Fear and adrenalin rush through the three of us. This place is safe right?

We get a call from our friend Ryan who is up in Detroit. We tell him about the wall crashing down. He says he can hear the fear in our voice. He expresses his concern for us and gives us a final weather report. The line goes dead. No more communication, we are on our own. From what he tells us the storm is almost to us and it's bad. So the hurricane is still not here yet. Buildings are falling apart and it's not even here yet! This place is safe right?

There is a parking lot we can see. A white pickup truck is parked there. We watch as the water and wind push the truck further north into the parking lot. Eventually it disappears. We never do see that truck again.

11:30AM:

Katrina is in full effect now. The water outside our building is about 7 feet deep. As waves roll through the building we can feel it sway back and forth. At this point we are really wondering if this whole thing is going to collapse. Siding is getting ripped off the walkway outside and flying by our window. We hope that it doesn't come crashing through the window but we still sit there with pillows as shields just in case.

A huge water spout forms in our parking lot, it looks just like a tornado. We go running for the back of the room for cover. Luckily it goes in a different direction or dissipates.

At one point around now there is a loud bang on the back wall where the bathroom is. The wall shakes. We assume there's another room behind ours and the wind has broken into that room and thrown the furniture against our wall. We will get back to that later.

The wind and rain are so heavy now that all you can see is white outside with the occasional debris from buildings flying by.

12:30PM:

The ocean in the parking lot has receded. Sustained winds are over 150 MPH with gusts up to 200 MPH. We keep hearing loud banging sounds beneath us. We hope that it isn't the building buckling after all the flooding that took place. We think what we could possibly do at this point to be in a safer place. There's no good answer to that question. Going outside or to another building is not an option.

1:30PM

We have been up for around 7 hours now. The wind and rain have been consistently getting worse and worse. We just sit there in awe watching the wind and debris fly by. How long will this go on we wonder? We have no way of telling where the storm is or how much has gone by.

We are curious as to what is going on beyond our window. Dave ventures outside with a garbage can as a shield and edges south on the balcony/walkway outside. He barely gets to the corner and turns back. He says: "remember that Waffle House out front, it's gone" The entire structure was gone, nothing left what-so-ever. We were a bit relieved however to find that the front of our building was somewhat intact.

4:30PM

The wind went on for hours and hours. It's hard to describe what a sustained wind over 150 MPH is like. Imagine lying down on railroad tracks and having a bullet train pass directly over you for 9+ hours. I just can't put it into words. After this long it's almost like we got used to it. The wind was blowing straight through our parking lot so we were able to open our window and watch. We just sat there in our chairs, feet up on the air conditioner, watching the world fly by our hotel room. That intermittent banging sound from below still there. I finally figured out it was the doors in the rooms below us getting blown open and shut.

We start venturing out on the walkway. No siding is left so we go without the garbage can shield. We edge our way north to see how Melissa's car fared. It wasn't there. We go back into the room and watch more. Dave finally finds her car in another part of the parking lot closer to the main office, luckily behind the main office. From our vantage point it looks to be in ok shape. The roof is dented in and a massive amount of debris is piled on and around it. The car had been wedged into all the other cars in the parking lot. We couldn't tell if any windows were broken but it didn't look like it.

5:30PM → ?

The wind has died down a bit but still blowing hard. Two guys about our age come up to the room and tell us we better get out. Remember that loud bang against our back wall. As it turns out there was no room behind us. The entire west brick wall of our building collapsed. The only thing between us and Mother Nature for the past few hours was some plywood and drywall. Also the first floor was in real bad shape from the storm surge and wind.

Outside we see total destruction as we venture out. We have to lean into the wind heading south or lean back heading north as we walk around and survey the damage. Which-ever way we head we had to be constantly looking for debris flying at us. Occasionally we had to dodge a piece of siding or other miscellaneous parts of buildings. Definitely not a safe environment to be in but at the same time we wanted to explore a little.

The hotel manager tells us how lucky we are to be alive and that the lady who checked us in should have never put us in that building. She also tells us that the hotel has only been around for 13 YEARS! The other lady LIED TO US, the hotel hadn't survived Camiel in 1969. Why would somebody tell us stories like that?

Some other people there tell us that the car had floated and was blown way up the road and then brought back when the surge receded. Luckily the ocean didn't take it all the way back.

We eventually moved our stuff into a soaking wet room that was more structurally stable. Then we ventured out to the main road. Looking up and down the road we were amazed that pretty much the entire coast was leveled. Huge buildings that looked sturdy, places we considered staying reduced to skeletons or nothing at all.

The huge pirate ship which was part of the Treasure Bay Casino had been ripped from its foundation and moved about 150 yards (guess?) northwest. The back and bottom of the ship ripped apart. This sight was probably one of the most amazing and the first thing people noticed as they looked down the coastline.

We walked east along Highway 90. Behind our hotel was an apartment building destroyed. I remember seeing clothing still hung up in what used to be a closet blowing around and thinking that was somebody's home. A few days later we would learn that at least 30 people had been killed in that apartment when the building collapsed. I still have a hard time thinking about that scene.

Darkness finally comes, the wind is gone, and the rain is gone. It seemed like it would never end. The hotel manager brings us some hot coffee, bread and hotdogs. You've never seen anybody

so grateful for something to eat. Food hadn't crossed our minds all day with all the excitement. Eventually we go to sleep.

Tuesday August 30, 2005 - THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW

Somehow Dave's cell phone gets a signal and I am able to make a brief phone call into work telling them about our situation and that I probably won't be in for a day or two.

The car has a huge pile of debris surrounding it along with all the other cars. How will we ever get it out? Is it even drive-able? Will it start?

Everyone at the hotel seems to think we will be stuck here for at least a week. Everyone agrees that this must have been a very deadly storm, as the days go by the death toll will start to come in as they discover bodies buried under what used to be buildings.

We walk west down Highway 90. The morning sun is blazing. What used to be a southern paradise has been turned into hell. We pass a cemetery, debris scattered around. We were shocked to see a mausoleum (large above ground tomb) ripped to shreds, caskets strewn about. Even the dead couldn't rest through that storm. We learned that people's remains had been ejected from their caskets. Luckily those had been cleaned up before we got there. It was still one of many sad scenes we witnessed and will always remember.

Eventually we get back to the hotel and start the long process of digging out our vehicle. It takes a few hours and the work is not easy because we are weak from not eating much. When we get most of the debris out of the way we find there is a large piece of metal wedged under the front of the car. We take some 2x4's and are able to bang the metal down and remove it. The front wheels are both turned in the same direction (a good sign). A narrow path is cleared to the passenger side door. Dave inserts the key, pushes down the clutch.... our little moment of truth.... and turns the key. The car ROARS (as much as a little diesel VW Beetle can roar) to life without missing a beat!

We keep the car running because we don't want to risk shutting it down and it not starting. Our stuff is loaded in. Everyone is still telling us there's no way out. Too much debris on the road, the bridges are out; a large construction crane has fallen across a road, a semi-trailer across another. That doesn't stop us, we are determined to leave and leave now. Dave slowly maneuvers the car down the street. A few wrong turns and dead ends later we find a stream of cars and finally get to the highway!

At first the ride is smooth as we gaze out the window at the destruction all around us. As we make our way north we come to a halt. Tree's had fallen across the highway and crews were working on cutting them and moving them to the side. At some points we were able to drive on the wrong side of the highway. At other times we had to take side roads and work our way around debris and more dead ends.

Absolute destruction continues as we head north. I would say the storm was still going strong up to 200 miles inland before it started to weaken. Luckily the car had a $\frac{3}{4}$ full tank and got great gas mileage (500 miles to the tank!) because we didn't find an open/standing gas station for about 300+ miles. We filled up the car and then went straight for a Wendy's across the street. 3 Biggie Sized meals please! That food was so good. When we got back to the car we could not get the windows up. So much junk (dry wall & insulation) stuck to the windows and had gotten into the motor and jammed it up. It would be a windy ride home. That seemed almost fitting for this trip.

We continued on. Darkness started to fall again. Melissa didn't want to continue on and wanted us to drop her at her friends place in Atlanta. There was no way in hell we were going 6 hours out of our way to Atlanta. We dropped her at a Waffle House in Chattanooga, TN and I gave her \$10 and told her to get a newspaper, a cup of coffee and chill. Her friend was only about 30

minutes away (he had left the Atlanta area over an hour ago) so we took off with her car. We promised to take it to a shop and pay the deductible to get it fixed.

Midway through Kentucky it started to rain. We had run into what was left of Hurricane Katrina. Remember our windows are down. We stop at a gas station to clean junk off of the windshield wipers and continue down the road. Occasionally we pull over to blast the heat. It was cold rainy and miserable. At one point we decide to stop and pull into a gas station cover the windows with towels and somehow manage to sleep.

In the morning we wake up, the rain has stopped and we go on our way. We stop at a Mc Donald's for some food and get a few newspapers. We really can't read about it all. It's too much to take at that point. We eat our food and start again for home.

About 2:30 in the afternoon on Wednesday we pull into my driveway. What a relief! In just 5 hours we had tickets to go see The Rolling Stones play at Comerica Park. Dave went home. We both got cleaned up. No rest for the wicked and off to see the greatest rock-n-roll band in the world. A happy ending to a horrifying story. But it doesn't end here.

AFTERMATH & MY THOUGHTS:

Dave and I both agreed that we had lived through an amazing experience. We got out of that place alive and we had to do everything we could to help those people. Their lives were destroyed. Their homes flooded and collapsed, their businesses destroyed and many of their neighbors taken by the storm. They needed our help and they needed it now.

We decided to call on everyone we knew, collect supplies and get them down there. Dave had been through at least three of the hurricane's that passed through central Florida last year (2004). He knew that help would be slow to come and that people would be without necessities for a long time.

In just over a week we collected literally a ton of supplies. People heard our story and opened their hearts and gave everything they could. They still are! Everything from water (500+ gallons), food, baby supplies, first aid, bedding, clothing and shoes. We loaded up two large pickup trucks with big trailers attached. Dave and his brother Joe took everything down there and are getting supplies to those that need them the most. I am continuing to contact people and get donations shipped down as soon as possible.

It's the least we could do and the only thing we could do to quiet or conscious if only a little bit. We still can't watch the news very much at all. But hopefully others that weren't there can and see the destruction and that those people need help now and will for awhile.

It makes me mad when I hear blame being pointed at different people and groups. It doesn't matter. The hurricane didn't care what color you were, who you prayed to or what political party you backed. It didn't care how well buildings were built or who or what was inside them. It demolished everything in its path.

Stop watching the news. Do everything you can to help the AMERICAN PEOPLE whose lives have been ruined. This is a time for people to help people. Take action now.

That's my story.