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## After Katrina: Tales of the Storm, from Houston and Buffalo

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# Alumni Profiles

## AFTER KATRINA

### *Tales of the storm, from Houston and Buffalo*

**L**ike a hurricane coursing across open water, sometimes life takes a sudden turn. For the residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, that reality became unavoidably true on the weekend of Aug. 26 to 28. As Hurricane Katrina bore down on the below-sea-level city, and those who could evacuate hit the road, residents knew that their lives would be forever altered by the power of wind and water.

**Barbara Ryniker Evans '76** was one UB Law School alumna who learned that lesson. Evans, a partner in the downtown New Orleans law firm Evans, Schnabel & Associates, fled with her family as the Category 4 hurricane approached. They have established themselves in Houston while the city of New Orleans continues to recover from its worst disaster in recorded history.

"The storm has presented challenges on a whole variety of levels," Evans said. "Our office tower, across the street from the federal courthouse, had several hundred windows blown out and is closed indefinitely. There is the challenge of transferring technology and files and servers here to Houston. The commercial litigation that we do has come to a halt. The state courthouse in New Orleans remains shuttered. There is a question about the integrity of the official records. So there have been a lot of practical problems."

On a family level, her husband has set up a "shadow operation" in Houston for his import-export business, and has brought his employees to Texas. Their



Barbara Ryniker Evans '76

17-year-old son has now enrolled in a Houston high school for his senior year, after New Orleans schools were closed by storm damage. (They also have a daughter who is a student at Amherst College in Massachusetts.)

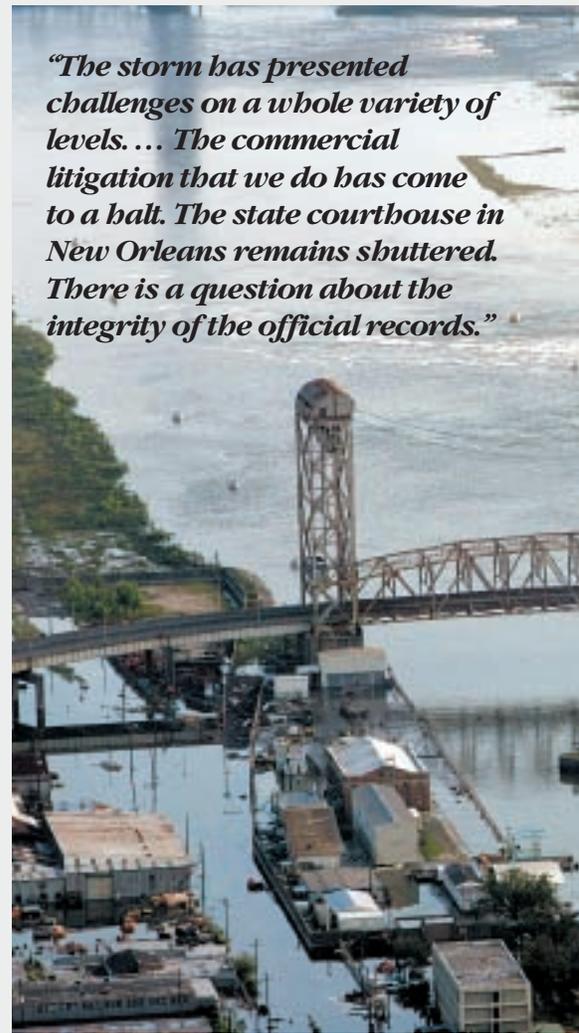
The Evanses' uptown New Orleans neighborhood, "in a beautiful part of the city that has a lot of 18th and 19th century houses and a lot of large oak trees," was unaffected by severe flooding, but suffered "a tremendous amount of wind damage and damage

from trees. Our neighborhood is very much as it was, with the exception of debris." Her law partner's house, however, was flooded.

Throughout the city, she said, houses sport large blue tarpaulins on their roofs, concealing storm damage. It is difficult to find qualified workers to do cleanup and repair work, given the great need and the fact that many New Orleans residents remain evacuees.

Professionally, many of her law firm's usual clients – individuals and business interests in Louisiana – have suffered major damage. "The legal profession is going to change as a result of the significant economic changes that have been

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wrought by the storm," Evans said. "In the long term, the profession will remain viable, but there are a lot of short-term challenges." The caseload is now full of labor and unemployment work as the Gulf Coast feels the economic brunt of the storm.

The state of Texas, she said, has granted displaced attorneys provisional admission to the Texas bar through May, and she may seek permanent admission to that bar. And the dislocation may be opening up new opportunities for the firm: "Most of us feel we will continue to have a business presence here in Texas," Evans said.

She has lived in New Orleans for 23 years, though, so the shock and awe of a city so deeply disrupted is great. "It was a very, very difficult thing for us to see our city on fire and flooded," she said. "We were safe, but there was nothing we could do to help.

"But you count your blessings. We are all well, and we have received a tremendous amount of support from our friends. I have heard from my colleagues



New Orleans after hurricane Katrina

at UB, many of whom I have not heard from in years, and a lot of professional colleagues, too.

"There are a lot of pluses as well as the negatives.

"We have all just banded together to help one another and make the best we can of the situation in which we find ourselves, which is one of the benefits of having a family."

Among those displaced by the storm damage were law students from Loyola University New Orleans and Tulane University, also in New Orleans. Three enrolled in UB Law School as visiting students for the fall semester: Michelle Schwach, an Amherst native; Peter Bodonaro, from Niagara Falls; and Sara Johnson, a native of Williamsville.

The three are among as many as 100,000 students at 30 institutions whose educational plans were disrupted by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

Schwach had completed orientation and a week of classes when she got a call from a family friend in New Orleans on Aug. 26, a day before the National

Hurricane Center extended a hurricane watch for Louisiana.

"She said, 'This looks like it is going to be a bad storm, Michelle,'" said Schwach. "I just had a bad feeling about it. I said, 'I am just going to leave.'"

She took a Saturday afternoon flight back to Buffalo, then followed the storm over the next week from her family's Amherst home. "Watching everything unfold was brutal for me," she said. "The worst part of it was watching the aftermath. And every day it got worse. I cannot believe it. I still cannot believe it."

**A**fter Loyola announced Sept. 4 that it would be closed until January, Schwach began looking for another law school where she could study for the fall semester. When she contacted UB Law, Schwach, a 2005 UB graduate whose father, Lawrence, is a 1983 alumnus of the Law School, was able to reserve a spot. "It worked out really, really well," she said.

"I think it has been absolutely incredi-

ble that these schools will just take students in and not ask questions, and worry about the paperwork later," said Schwach, who plans to return to New Orleans next semester. "If the city is safe and livable, I want to go back," she said. "I think it would be great to go back and do what I can."

Sara Johnson, a second-year student visiting UB for the semester from Tulane, described the unexpected turns her school year has taken.

"We never thought this would happen," she said. Having evacuated for Hurricane Ivan during her first year in New Orleans, which turned out to be less damaging than predicted, Johnson and many of her classmates assumed that Katrina would be the same situation – a few days off from classes and the inconvenience of finding a place to stay.

"On Friday night I was with friends," she said. "No one was really watching TV or checking online. I was not worried, because normally my mom is on top of this stuff and calling to tell me. Then suddenly it was, 'You need to leave now.'"

Johnson traveled to Austin, Texas, then flew home to Buffalo. What has become of the belongings in her second-floor apartment, she is not sure. Though she has been told that 7 feet of water filled her neighborhood, online satellite pictures show less damage – at least on the surface.

"The mold grows so fast you would never believe it," she said. Then there are the refrigerators left full of food. "Some people have found maggots three feet deep," she said.

The least of her problems was finding a law school to attend for the semester: "I e-mailed Dean (Melinda) Saran on Friday night and had an answer back by Saturday morning. I arrived in Buffalo and registered for classes all on the Tuesday the semester started."

Tulane is planning a normal spring semester, and Johnson plans to return there in January. Looking toward that day, she said, "My main concern is, where am I going to live?"