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For Katrina evacuees, holiday season brings a new perspective

'You realize that family is the most important thing'

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Christmas will be quiet for Sharon Morang this year, the first in her apartment off Barry Road. A couple of gifts sit under her new artificial Christmas tree.

It is a time for settling down.

For many, the holidays are a time for family, loved ones, thanksgivings and resolutions. But for Morang and as many as 2,000 other hurricane evacuees in the metropolitan area, the season provides a stinging reminder of loss.

"I think once my father's remains are buried, we can just move on," Morang said.

Her 74-year-old father, Robert Morang, died months ago, sometime after Hurricane Katrina, according to his death certificate.

Sharon Morang, a former resident of Slidell, La., and her siblings spent 2 1/2 months wrestling with various morgue officials, some of whom were volunteers, to recover his body, which they thought had been lost. Now, the family has a January funeral planned in Southern California, where the family once lived.

Morang moved to Kansas City from Louisiana with her 24-year-old daughter, Mackenzie Rodriguez, in October. She had been sitting at the side of her 20-year-old daughter in the squalor of a Hattiesburg, Miss., hospital while doctors without electricity struggled to diagnose and treat the illnesses that had sent the young woman into a coma.

When her younger daughter, Jackie Holcomb, awoke and began to improve, Morang was encouraged to depart for Kansas City to build a new life.

Morang and about 60 fellow employees of the online Grantham University relocated from Slidell to Kansas City. Employees say they have it good — the university is paying six months' rent for all

displaced employees and has provided other stipends.

Chief executive and chairman Tom Macon and his wife, Deborah Steelman Macon, established a foundation with \$100,000 of their own money to help the hardest-hit employees.

Many others have received help from the local Red Cross, the Salvation Army and other organizations.

Despite the help, hectic holiday traditions of last-minute gift-buying and preparing big meals aren't an option for an emotionally drained Morang, a product development coordinator for Grantham.

"Things that were once important are no longer important," she said. "You realize that family is the most important thing."

That lesson has made some Gulf Coast evacuees, such as 9-year-old Brian Beard, want for little and cling to hope for what's to come.

His rare, potentially terminal case of congenital encephalitis qualified him for help from the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

His family's abrupt move from Picayune, Miss., to Kansas City trumped Brian's Make-A-Wish trip to Disney World, which was set to begin the same day. The family can't afford to reschedule.

"I think that is what hurts the worst," said Sandra Beard, Brian's mother and a Grantham admissions representative.

The energetic child, whose heart, lungs and muscular and skeletal systems are breaking down, wants nothing more than Yu-Gi-Oh cards for Christmas.

His sisters, 14-year-old Christian and 11-year-old Laura, want bunk beds. Christian sleeps on a futon chair; Laura on the floor next to Brian's bed.

Their lists don't include bicycles or other child-like frivolity.

"They wanted comfort items," Beard said.

Kansas City has given the family hope. Doctors at the University of Kansas Hospital showed them new treatments for Brian. They've kept him healthy enough to stay in school.

He can play outside, an activity he avoided under the burning Mississippi sun. And his family found an insurance company that will cover him.

“We have hope,” Beard said.

Other evacuees grieve their Christmas ornaments, their photo albums — things that can't be replaced.

Shahaila Bills had collected ornaments for each year of her three children's lives. She had made scrapbooks for them each year, as her own mother had done for her. Bills had planned to give each of her children — now 9, 7 and 4 — a set of 18 scrapbooks on their 18th birthdays. Hurricane Katrina washed it all away from their Slidell townhome.

“The shock is starting to wear off and you're starting to feel the loss,” Bills said. “The holiday season kind of multiplies it.”

The children will spend Christmas visiting Bills' mother-in-law, who gutted her own Slidell home and started rebuilding.

The children may see devastation, but they won't lack gifts. An outpouring from local churches and relief organizations has delivered piles of them to the Bills family.

“I think my kids have more Christmas presents this year than they've ever had,” Bills said.
