

Posted on Sun, Feb. 18, 2007

COMMENTARY

Feeling of home lost — and found

By RHONDA CHRISS LOKEMAN
Columnist



Photos by Susan Pfanmuller | Special to The Star

At left: Melanie and Rudy Mayer and their daughters Lorelei and Brindisi moved to Independence after the hurricane. At right: At her parents' home in Kansas City, Caroline Hiatt, a recent graduate from Tulane University in New Orleans, looked through a box of photos retrieved after Katrina.



"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ...we had everything before us, we had nothing before us ..."

— from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

Melanie Mayer never took herself for a Midwestern gal. That changed after Katrina hit New Orleans, where she lived with her two daughters and husband.

They were unharmed and except for downed trees, their home in Covington outside New Orleans was spared.

"I had a beautiful home," Mayer said. "But our jobs were washed away."

Mayer's employer, Grantham University, relocated her and the girls to an apartment in Independence where they lived for six months. Husband Rudy stayed behind to tend to the home and find work. Eventually, the Mayers moved into the Katrina house donated by First Baptist Church in Independence. Rudy joined them later.

Many displaced residents want to go home to New Orleans. The Mayers are here to stay and intend to buy from First Baptist the Victorian-style house that reminds them of New Orleans' Garden District. They fell out of love with New Orleans and in love with the Kansas City area.

"It's the Midwest lifestyle and the values people have here. There is no doubt in my mind why they call it the heartland of America," Mayer said.

Despite having left insurance cards behind, she said a local pharmacist helped her with a prescription for one of her daughters. While flustered at a mall with crying children, some teenagers lent a hand.

"People here are great. It was like a big wave pushed me up here. This is the best-kept secret in America," Mayer said. "Now that we have this opportunity, I truly believe God has provided."

She hasn't been back to New Orleans since Katrina, but Rudy has, to try to sell their other home. "I can't understand why people would want to move back," Mayer said.

But Caroline Hiatt knows what it means to miss New Orleans. The Kansas City woman lost everything in Katrina. After graduating from Tulane University, she flew back to Kansas City in August 2005 to visit family. She was supposed to return to pursue an art history career. Katrina hit while she was away.

"I didn't get to evacuate," Hiatt said. "Had I that chance, I would have taken my shoebox of photos with me." When she returned months later to the apartment she shared with a roommate, Hiatt said the water mark was above five feet. Furniture had collapsed. There were moldy boxes holding things she hadn't unpacked. Original art was destroyed.

"I was able to recover a few sentimental things, some art that a friend of mine who passed away made and my sorority paddle that meant much to me," Hiatt said.

She's disgusted with how government and insurers responded. "I'm pretty much like a lot of people. I've been screwed over by FEMA and insurance," Hiatt said.

"To lose everything is a shock to the system," she said, choking back tears. "While I'm technically home, really New Orleans feels like my home. I feel like I left a little piece of me there. Whenever I go back, and this sounds pathetic, but I feel really complete."

In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, two dominant themes are resurrection and transformation. These

women personify those themes in how they have recovered since Katrina.

At first when the wind blew hard in Independence, the Mayer girls wondered if a hurricane loomed. These days, they delight in making snowmen, Melanie Mayer said.

This weekend, Hiatt went to New Orleans for Mardi Gras and hopes to catch a prized coconut thrown by the Zulu krewe. She caught one before but lost it in Katrina.

Louisiana officials call their recovery effort "The Road Home." Hiatt is home right now. It's where she has been, as Jarvis Lorry said, "recalled to life."

To reach Rhonda Chriss Lokeman, call (816) 234-4475 or send e-mail to lokeman@kcstar.com.