

Katrina Kicked Off Troubled Souls' Odyssey

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(full article (<http://www.courant.com/news/nationworld/nation/wire/sns-ap-katrina-the-abstract-16,0,1043095.story>)) begins

HOUSTON --- They're out there. The shooters, the choppers, the looters, the lines, the foul water and the bodies. Especially the bodies. "But we're in here," says Victor Fruge.

Others --- hundreds of thousands of them --- had also escaped from New Orleans. But few could match the extraordinary, even miraculous odyssey of Fruge and his comrades --- 16 mentally ill men and recovering addicts, cast out of their group home, Abstract House, by the storm.

For a week the men stuck together through Hurricane Katrina and its rising waters, following a survival instinct like a candle in the dark and gamely caring for each other as they traveled unsupervised for nearly 500 miles. They arrived at dawn in Houston, a sprawling and unfamiliar city among the thousands of hurricane refugees who have made the exodus to Texas, but without a friend in sight.

Along the way they ate and slept in at least four different shelters and caught rides on four different means of transport, always clutching the psychotropic medications that keep their imaginary devils at arm's length while the real world around them sunk into a deeper hell.

"You don't see that a lot in this business," says Dr. Sara Allison, a psychiatrist who treated the men during their first night in the Astrodome and has been checking on them daily since then. "But there were a lot of things in this (emergency) that you don't see a lot of." ...

They are not inmates. While they might be delusional, largely toothless and at times hilarious, they are not really rebellious. Wearing scraps of donated clothing, the men range in age from 30 to 70. Several are quiet --- Leonard, for one, didn't speak for 12 days after the storm.

For these men who are schizophrenic, bipolar, severely depressed, obsessive-compulsive and shellshocked from war --- often simultaneously --- Hurricane Katrina and its agonizing aftermath have forced them to function as a family, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

"We look out for each other," says Raymond Jean Pierre, ... "We stick together," says Patrick Pitchford,...

Emergency officials say 4,300 people have sought mental health counseling and 14 people have been hospitalized for psychiatric needs. Some 40 recovering heroin addicts have enrolled in methadone clinics...

For now, the men are living in a group home in southwest Houston. If it's not the Ritz, it's warm, clean and safe. There's a regular schedule of 12-step meetings. It's down the road from a bowling alley and a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

But it's not New Orleans. About the only thing that reminds them of their bawdy, zany hometown is a Chinese woman with maroon hair slumped at the next table.

Over and over, she sings the Tennessee Waltz.

"I was dancin' with my darlin'...."

Their odyssey began with the rest of New Orleans' poor. They knew the hurricane was coming, but had no cars in which to make their escape and no place to go anyway.

On Sunday morning, the Abstract House caretakers hustled a total of 16 residents --- and Mike Campos, a former resident who was visiting for the weekend --- into vans headed for the Superdome, about a mile away. The caretakers drove a few of their neediest residents to Baton Rouge, about 80 miles away...

The men initially were excited to be on their own, but grew increasingly agitated. Stress and disruption are as threatening to psychotics as the winds that peeled the Superdome's roof like an orange. Once inside, they barricaded themselves behind privacy curtains and packing crates.

Some paced. Others mumbled and tugged at their hair. The darkened stadium grew unbearably hot. It echoed with wailing and gunshots as predators rampaged and the stinking floodwaters rose. Nobody came...

So they were 16. Victor doled out the next round of medications.

Haldol, Seroquel, Depakote, Zoloft, Cogentin, Xanax, Paxil, Cibalith. And about a dozen more.

"I'm in charge of the medications because of my street knowledge," he explains, "That, and my mother was trained to be a nurse. Some of these guys need their pills four times a day." ...

On Wednesday, they made a break for the adjacent New Orleans Arena after hearing conditions were better. They weren't. People there were tying plastic bags on their feet to slosh through pools of urine.

On Thursday, they edged their way outside. A National Guard truck chugged them through the filthy floodwaters and onto the cloverleaf where Interstate 10 meets the Causeway. They joined a crowd that stretched forever on the concrete highway ramp and waited for hours in the sun.

People dropped beside them, while the helicopters disgorged more of the dazed and dirty. Victor distributed the 9 p.m. meds early.

When the first evacuation buses arrived, the men were caught in the desperate pushing and shoving. Unlike the characters in "Cuckoo's Nest," they sought authority figures for protection. Victor: "I showed a soldier my red wristband."...

The bus headed northwest toward Baton Rouge, and the men thought they would be reunited with Miss Byrnes. Instead, it veered 270 miles to Fort Polk, a large Army base in west Louisiana. They waited for two hours outside the locked gates until soldiers turned the bus away...

After another 200 miles, the bus pulled up to the Astrodome. The men showered for the first time in six days and ate. They circled their cots again, then looked for help.

"Vic came up to us at the medical triage center and said there were 16 mental patients in a group," recalls psychiatrist Allison. "We asked him if he was their caretaker. He said, 'No, I'm one of the patients!'" ...

Three of the men --- Bruce, Richard and James --- were hospitalized. The others were re-medicated and spent Saturday night in another group home. On Sunday, Allison relocated them to Liberty Island, a group home in southwest Houston. It operates in a converted hotel...

Despite New Orleans' decadent reputation, the warm sense of belonging they felt at the Abstract compelled the men to stay clean. For the most part.

Liberty Island's rules may be stricter, but some of the men begin lapsing. Uncontrollable laughter is one sign. Arguments escalate. Miss Aretha is on the phone with the psychiatrists arranging treatment options...

What's next for the Abstract 16? It's the same question dogging more than 1 million Gulf Coast residents now scattered from Utah to Cape Cod in the greatest American diaspora since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, or even the Civil War.

Will they return to languid, delicious, sexy New Orleans, where life on a good day feels like you're high? What will it be like then? Some of the men think they know...

The Chinese woman starts singing again. "I remember the night and the Tennessee Waltz. Now I know just how much I have lost..." (full article (<http://www.courant.com/news/nationworld/nation/wire/sns-ap-katrina-the-abstract-16,0,1043095.story>))