



## Home at Last after Katrina

To a visitor, one of the most startling sights in Biloxi, Mississippi these days is the calm, lovely water of the Gulf that sparkles close by the buildings most devastated by Hurricane Katrina. It seems in one moment to be as inviting as a childhood day at the beach, and in the next, a glitteringly malevolent reminder of the deadly storm. And nowhere is the water's split personality so evident as in the ruined seaside houses and apartments of Biloxi's poorest people.

One sunny morning recently, just a month after the storm, Back Bay Mission's community organizer Roberta Avila stood in the debris that used to be a low-income apartment house. Despite an eviction notice—the building has been condemned—Kent Campbell, a Mission client, was picking his way around debris and pools of standing water to stay in his apartment. He'd pitched a tent in his bedroom to shelter him from the mosquitoes that are thriving in the damp, moldy post-hurricane environment.

Kent faced the complications of life common to all storm survivors—the counter-intuitive language in FEMA paperwork, the shortage of trailers, the long wait for help in situations where waiting is impossible. But along with other people whose lives were precarious before Katrina, Kent's situation is fraught with frustration.

Until about six months ago, Kent was chronically homeless, living in the woods and eating at a local soup kitchen. His story is familiar: although he once had a stable, lucrative job as a welder on Navy ships and offshore rigs—he eagerly produces evidence of his employment to show visitors—he reports that severe mental illness forced him to quit work. He sought to isolate himself from people to quell paranoid and disturbing thoughts that threatened to unravel his life further.

One day at the soup kitchen, Kent met an outreach worker from Back Bay Mission and was persuaded to accept assistance from Home at Last, Back Bay's program that helps homeless disabled people move to self-sufficiency. The program, founded in 2002, was the 2005 recipient of the Exemplary Program Award from the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries of the UCC (CHHSM). Home at Last arranged for Kent to receive services from Gulf Coast Mental Health, where a case worker, social worker, and psychiatrist work together to manage his care. With the Mission's help, including rent payments, Kent moved into an apartment and began the slow, delicate process of rebuilding a life that he could manage within the constraints of his illness.

Now Kent is homeless again. The shelters that have sprung up around Biloxi aren't an option for him—his mental illness is too profound to live in close, crowded quarters. He'd like to get a FEMA trailer, but needs assistance with the paperwork and red tape, frustrating even to those accustomed to navigating bureaucratic processes. And the wait is a month, while his apartment will begin to be razed in just six days.

So on this sunny Saturday morning, Roberta talks with Kent, patiently explaining his options. He can perhaps relocate to Mobile until a trailer is available; she is working with homeless advocates in that city to find homes for people like Kent. She promises to check on his paperwork and to try and find a home for the little kitten he found wandering just after the storm. And she gently reminds him that he must leave in six days, no matter what.

This is the work of Back Bay Mission today, a month after Katrina. Roberta works without an office: the Mission's campus was all but destroyed in the storm, and there's not yet anywhere to house the many volunteers who have offered to rebuild it. She works without being able to refer to case files, which are now a sodden mess of trash. And she works without the benefit of several of her colleagues who, now homeless themselves, have made the painful decision to begin their lives again elsewhere. But through Home at Last and other essential programs that the Mission is working to restart, Back Bay is continuing to provide essential help to the Mississippi Gulf Coast's most vulnerable people even as it struggles to rebuild itself.

Can you help? Please contribute to the Back Bay Mission Hurricane Relief Fund, established by the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Make checks payable to CHHSM, earmarked for Back Bay Mission, and sent to the CHHSM office at 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH, 44120. Unless otherwise directed, CHHSM will inform Back Bay Mission of the source and amount of all contributions to the Fund. Contributions made through CHHSM are tax-deductible and all contributors will receive a receipt from CHHSM acknowledging their contribution for tax purposes.