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After Katrina, teens cope - Displaced friends fight feelings of isolation by clinging to each other

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"Hurt." That's the word 17-year-old Jasmine Myers utters to describe life since Hurricane Katrina submerged her New Orleans East home.

Jasmine, who fled the hurricane with her parents by car, now lives in an apartment in Irving and is a junior at MacArthur High School. She has cried a lot, she says. And five months later, she is still coming to terms with living in a new place.

"It's a day-by-day thing," she says. "Often I get sad, because I think about everything that I lost. I wish I could just go back. My whole life was back there."

Being a teenager is hard enough without having to deal with loss and displacement. But months after the storm, school counselors warn that among teenage evacuees such as Jasmine, the most intense emotions are only now beginning to surface.

Jasmine is lucky, because her best friend, Mia Pauline, who lived around the corner from her in New Orleans, has settled with her family in an apartment in Fort Worth. The teens, who met in first grade, share the pain of adapting to a new place. Individually and together, they have taken some steps to adjust and stick it out.

But it is not easy.

"Back home, I would have had the friends, the money," Jasmine says. "It would be the time when I could do what I wanted. I had so much planned before Katrina came. Then it came, and it changed everything."

In Texas, both girls spend most of their time alone or with their parents. They say they have not made any new friends, because local students make fun of them, don't understand and don't accept them. They get some support from their schools but lean heavily on their families - and each other.

Mia, also 17, recalls how the two used to catch the city bus to Sarah T. Reed Senior High School together every day, how they would return in the afternoons, stop at restaurants to eat and hang out. The two were also on the same dance team, and marched in parades.

"It's very different here," says Mia, a junior at Eastern Hills High School in Fort Worth. "I don't see Jasmine very often. I take the school bus from school straight home."

What Jasmine misses most is her clothes, her baby pictures, and her friends - everything that she surrounded herself with, everything she had collected, she said. Her family could not salvage anything from their flooded home.

Mia, on the other hand, mourns the loss of her writing. A white binder, which contained her poems, plays and short stories, was lost to the water.

Both girls said they continue to "feel down" on most days.

A rough time

Experts say teenage years, the time for establishing independence and individuality, are the most difficult, unwieldy

years to have to uproot.

"What's really difficult for the teenagers is that there's so very little that they have control over. And their wish to have control has been emphasized because they've been traumatized," says psychologist Laurel Wagner, co-chair of the Dallas Psychological Association Disaster Response Team.

"The teenagers have a tremendous, tremendous sense of being displaced," she says. "They have emotionally invested years and years into a school, a sport, their friends, things that are important to a teenager's identity. And suddenly, all these markers are basically taken away from them."

Both Jasmine and Mia said they feel like they no longer fit in. "I don't have friends down here," Jasmine says, "because I don't have the time to make someone understand what I'm going through. I'd rather keep my distance from them."

Peers at their Texas high schools taunt them, the girls said, for using different words and having a different accent and wearing different clothes.

"I don't care for them, because they don't care for us," Jasmine says. "They say, 'You all dirty, why you all come here?' They assume everyone is bad there, but that's simply not true."

The two girls say several fights between local students and evacuee teens had broken out at their schools.

The school districts that welcomed students from New Orleans say they have counselors in place to help individual students adjust, and to ease tensions between local students and Louisiana evacuees. At MacArthur High, Jasmine can meet one-on-one with a counselor. At Eastern Hills, Mia attends a weekly group session with other evacuee students.

Dr. Rosemarie Allen, associate superintendent for student support and special services for the Dallas Independent School District, which absorbed the largest number of New Orleans students, says schools are "in it for the long haul," because emotional problems associated with surviving a disaster take time to surface.

"The kids who need the most help are now just starting to bubble up and show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder," she says. "The most dramatic symptoms will surface probably even later."

Leaning on each other

Jasmine and Mia say that parents, and not school counselors, continue to be their main source of emotional support.

"No one is ever going to understand my experience if they were not in this situation. That's why my parents and I, we help each other," Jasmine says. "It's not that I really ever sat down and talked with them about how I feel. I never really said that I'm not happy. But I think, I hope, that they understood."

"She's a toughie," says her father, Freddy Myers. "I've watched her take on more responsibility for representing who she is and where she comes from. I've watched her grow up and become a young lady."

For Jasmine and Mia, growing up after Katrina has meant continually facing loss.

"It showed me that you could lose something so fast," Jasmine said, "and that you should never take anything for granted. It's still hard to believe at times that it really happened."

Jasmine still wonders what happened to Nana, a woman who was like a godmother to her. Jasmine last had contact with her a few weeks before the hurricane and doesn't know if Nana is still alive. One of Mia's close friends is also missing.

A new life

The two girls cope with their loss together. Their parents said they watched them growing closer.

"The girls are a great support for each other," says Mia's mother, Laura Pauline. "Jasmine and her parents have become extended family." So much so, that Mia's parents decided to stay put in Fort Worth so the girls don't lose contact.

During Thanksgiving break, the two took a bus together to Houston to visit some friends who had evacuated to that city. They had kept in touch by phone.

Also in early November, the teenagers went back to see their New Orleans East neighborhood.

"I went, because I knew I had to face it," Mia says. "It was bad. Everything was messed up. It made me realize that I'm not going back. I guess we have to learn to adjust."

In the fall, Jasmine started an after-school job at a Grapevine Mills mall clothing store, a step her parents consider a sign of adjustment. She did not work in New Orleans. In December, Jasmine left her job at the mall, saying that the commute was too difficult.

As for Mia, she praises her new school system as better and is looking forward to job opportunities in Texas.

But adjustment will take time, both girls said. Since the hurricane, Mia said she has not been able to write. She is blocked. "I don't even know where to start," she said. "Everything is gone."

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Caption: PHOTO(S): (1-3. Photos by DARON DEAN/Staff Photographer) 1. Best friends Mia Pauline (left) and Jasmine Myers, both 17, ended up at different schools after their families fled New Orleans. 2. Mia Pauline (left) and Jasmine Myers test perfume at an Arlington mall. They have made few other friends since leaving New Orleans. 3. Best friends Mia Pauline (left) and Jasmine Myers, both 17, spend time together at The Parks at Arlington mall. (COVER) CHART(S): HELPING TEENAGERS ADJUST

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