

## BROUGHT BY A HURRICANE TO MINNESOTA, ONE MSW STUDENT'S PATH TO SOCIAL WORK

Camille Stinson-Glapion

*The following story is excerpted from Camille's personal statement, submitted last winter with her application to Augsburg's MSW Program.*

In the beginning I thought it was a regular evacuation. New Orleans had been threatened by hurricanes many times before. I took a weekend's worth of clothes and left town. I had no idea this would be the last time I would see my city, my home, as it exists now only in my memory. Nor did I have any idea it would change my life so drastically, and turn a passion for social work into an angry, burning resolve to make a change in society and the policies we must live under.

It wasn't until the Saturday before it hit that the authorities told people to evacuate. On Monday, when the hurricane hit, I remember how confident I was that this would blow over and we would go right back. It never really occurred to me that we would never go back — not until, that is, I ran out of clothes. Then it hit me, I didn't bring anything with me — no pictures, no important documents, no sentimental items, let alone not enough clothes.

Initially, I felt safe because I was with family. Then the frustration really took hold when I had to begin looking for assistance. It was truly heartbreaking to stand in the lines at the Salvation Army, the thrift shops, the Red Cross, and any other place willing to give assistance. Everything was so secretive. You could call these places and they would tell you they were not allowed to discuss with you over the phone whether or not they were giving out assistance. I decided to volunteer for the Red Cross after the hurricane. Their unconventional style of helping "without all the red tape" struck me as very relevant for a career in social work. Through this experience of simultaneously being a victim and a helper, I realized tending to the most immediate needs is most important. To be a social worker is to be able to assess

a situation, use your best judgment, and act immediately. I also learned that being able to rise above my own issues and aid others was absolutely relevant to a career in social work.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was by far the worst example of how our society responds to those in need. FEMA would insist on information that people just did not have — a permanent address, birth certificate, legal identification, a lease, bank account information, or insurance information, just to name a few. After a while, they started to change some of their requirements, due to how unrealistic it was that people would have these things.

I can honestly say that I received more help from complete strangers, or from the Salvation Army or the Red Cross, with their no-questions-asked approach. The Salvation Army and the Red Cross were much better at providing immediate assistance — food, clothes, gift cards, and cash assistance. To this very day, I am still faxing and re-faxing FEMA the same documents over and over, showing how I am spending my assistance and proving I am a U.S.

citizen. In my heart I know all of this is a social injustice I should challenge, but I've failed to do so because I simply don't know where to begin.

In the fall my husband and I traveled to Minneapolis by Greyhound bus and found a stranger to live with through <KatrinaHousing.org>. This was extremely hard living with a complete stranger for three months, but that is how long it took FEMA to finally accommodate Hurricane Katrina victims into some type of permanent housing.

The hurricane affected all classes of people and we were all treated like it was *not* that bad. People still haven't collected on insurance claims, there are still uncollected dead bodies, there are still people whose homes will be demolished without their consent, there are still families who cannot claim their deceased because they are unrecognizable, and there are still missing children. It is my fervent hope that with an MSW degree I can begin a career in social work. I want to analyze these policies and address these kinds of issues. I want to be in a position to make change. I want to be a social worker.



Biloxi-Ocean Springs Bridge US Highway 90. "The Golden Fisherman" lies with his feet broken at Point Cadet Plaza, and some have mixed feelings about his aesthetics, but all agree the statue evokes powerful feelings about the history of the city.

photo by Stephen Geffre