

the **GO DUNK**

FOCUS ON SURVIVORS: Todd Slack '90 and family talk about how Hurricane Katrina took away their house but not their sense of home.

18
Summer ordeal puts things in perspective for Pisano family



26
Revisit Homecoming with a photo gallery highlighting the weekend



40
Four fall sports teams capture conference crowns



48
Professor T. David Gordon recounts struggle with cancer



Weathering the Storm

After losing everything tangible in Hurricane Katrina, Todd Slack '90 finds that the intangible can never be lost

By Amy Clingensmith '96

Before September, Todd Slack '90 seemed to have it all together. He was a successful lawyer in a small firm in the French Quarter of New Orleans. A year ago, he made partner. His wife, Adrienne, had a great career of her own with the Federal Reserve Bank. They were able to send their three children – Naomi, Victoria and Cooper – to a private school outside New Orleans.

Things were good.

But in late August, Todd Slack's life changed.

That was when he put his family on the highway and drove out of New Orleans, away from the ravages of Hurricane Katrina.

Days later, while essentially the rest of the country watched, they lost everything.

"Here I am," Todd said, "my wife and I successful professionals, reduced to homelessness and huge financial losses, standing in the Red Cross line, hoping for some assistance to put clothes on our children's backs."

It was a setback they never thought they'd see.

Todd and Adrienne were married in June 1990, just a month after his graduation from Grove City College. They'd met while in high school, both working at the PoFolks restaurant in Mississippi. Adrienne had been raised there and Todd had arrived with his military family in sixth grade after

growing up in Washington and Ohio. Adrienne, an economics major at the University of Southern Mississippi, was two years older than this high school senior. But the next summer, after Todd had become older and wiser during his freshman year at Grove City, the two started dating.

Through college, Todd and Adrienne maintained their long-distance relationship. Those were the days when the guys at Grove City shared one telephone per hall. Todd's friends and brothers of Delta Iota Kappa lined up to talk to Adrienne's friends, just to hear the southern accents.

Todd also had family on campus. His sister, Amy '88, was a Gamma Chi, and she married an alumnus, Eric Doerr '84. They live in Michigan.

In one month, Todd graduated, got married and moved to Dallas for a job as

a computer trainer, a position he was qualified for due to his computer science major and accounting minor. There, Todd worked for another alum, Greg Luckock '87.

Although Todd had always wanted to go to law school, both he and Adrienne knew it wasn't the right time. But after three years in Dallas, when they were more professionally settled, Todd realized he still had the legal bug. Adrienne encouraged him to take the LSATs, and his scores were good enough to get him into Loyola in New Orleans, a great decision for the young couple and their infant – Naomi, born in March 1993. Much of Adrienne's extended family was in the New Orleans area.

When Todd entered law school, he had a five-month-old child, and he had another five-month-old when he graduated in 1996. Little Victoria had



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joined the family. After earning his law degree, Todd worked with a few firms in the New Orleans area, then four years ago transitioned to Gainsburgh Benjamin David Muerier and Warshauer, right in the French Quarter of New Orleans on the 40th floor of a high-rise.

That 40th floor may have saved the company. After Katrina hit, Gainsburgh Benjamin employees wound through stairwells, collecting as many files as they could to start anew somewhere else.

After Katrina, people were starting anew all over the country. Adrienne's job gave the Slacks an opportunity to start over, at least temporarily, in Birmingham, Ala. A 15-year employee for the Atlanta branch of the Federal Reserve Bank in New Orleans, Adrienne's responsibilities included ensuring that all banks in the Southeast United States had cash, a duty that was immensely crucial as the storm began to rear its ugly head.

That weekend, Adrienne had a feeling this storm would be different. Storms have caused the Slacks to evacuate three times since they had moved to New Orleans in 1993.

"When you live in New Orleans, hurricane season is a part of life," Todd said.

In the past, the family had slept through Category 1 storms. Heavy winds and rain in the late summer were nothing new to residents of the Gulf Coast. In fact, most families kept large, plastic bins in the attic to store and transport photos and personal treasures. But rarely were these bins pulled down. After all, New Orleans hadn't seen a severe hurricane since Betsy in 1996. Few were ready to believe this was the one to drive them out of their city.

But throughout that weekend, reports were coming in fast and furious that Katrina was strong – one of the most severe hurricanes the Gulf had seen in decades. It wasn't until Sunday, Aug. 28, that Todd began to worry. He awoke early and immediately checked weather.com on the internet. He saw that Katrina had become a Category 5, and she was headed

straight for New Orleans. They needed to pack up and head out.

Adrienne had the same thoughts, but the night before. As soon as Todd echoed her feelings, she called the bank and suggested she do her job elsewhere to help the branches get through the storm. Bank officials agreed and sent the Slacks to Birmingham. Luckily, Adrienne had scheduled a business trip to Birmingham for that Sunday night so her hotel room was lined up – lucky because as people fled the city, hotels as far as 500 miles away were filling up fast.

The five Slacks, their black-and-white cat, Marble, and Todd's parents, who happened to be visiting from Chicago, filed into three vehicles – an SUV and two minivans – and started to drive north. The family knew

where they were going, but many families that day didn't know where they were headed – except "out."

The Slacks took with them three days of clothing and a few personal belongings. The kids, especially, couldn't take all they wanted. Naomi, the reader, had accumulated masses of books in the family's library, but took only a few of her favorites. There was no room for Cooper's buckets of Legos. Victoria had saved up her allowance to buy an enormous stuffed Shamu at the San Antonio Sea World during a family trip earlier that summer. He had to stay.

At first, the evacuation seemed a little premature. The kids were chattering, the weather was sunny and warm – "the calm before the storm," Todd said – and evacuating neighbors were talking to each

other from car to car. The only telltale sign something was wrong was the traffic. It took the Slacks three hours to go 30 miles.

In all, the trip from New Orleans to Birmingham totaled 11 hours, normally a five-hour drive. The Slacks arrived at the Marriott in Birmingham tired and concerned. There were seven – actually eight – of them in a one-bed room: Todd, Adrienne, Naomi, 12, Victoria, 10,

See **STORM**, page 6



OPPOSITE PAGE: The exterior of the Slacks' home showed the ravages of Hurricane Katrina clearly. **TOP PHOTO:** The dining area was in shambles after the room flooded then drained. **ABOVE:** Bedrooms also saw extensive damage with little to salvage inside. / Photos by Todd Slack '90



Family weathers ravages of storm

from page 5

Cooper, 6, Grandma, Grandpa and Marble. But there was a rollaway bed, an inflatable mattress from Wal-Mart, and Cooper slept in a chair. They were all together and safe, but wondering about their neighbors and Adrienne's family – and their house.

That Sunday night was the family's first of five at the Marriott. On Monday morning, they awoke to news that Katrina was about to hit hard. By day's end, news reports told anxious residents that the center of the storm had actually hit east of the city. Maybe, the Slacks thought, it wouldn't be as bad as everyone had feared.

On Tuesday, those fears were not only realized, they worsened.

After Katrina's winds died down, the second catastrophe struck. Levees just 22 houses down from the Slack home literally toppled over from the immense weight of 10 feet of water. In December, government studies showed that the steel reinforcements for the levees went only half as deep as they were supposed to. As a result, water poured into the surrounding neighborhoods.

While Todd knew that the levee brake was probably detrimental, he relied on the media for more information. Displaced New Orleans homeowners crowded around the Marriott computer center all day, every day, elbowing out the business travelers, hungry for any information on their homes.

A relatively new technology that allowed computer users to zoom into a particular area was the window to the Slack's new world. The local media had access to satellite flyovers and, through that technology, Todd clicked and clicked and clicked, zooming closer and closer to his home.

What he saw made his heart sink and his stomach drop.

"I saw brown water all around my



THIS PAGE: Telling stains on the walls were a sign of just how high the floodwaters had been.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Slacks lived 22 houses down from the levee break and their neighborhood was one of the last to drain, three weeks after the storm. / Photos by Todd Slack '90

roof," he said, "and I couldn't see my kids' swing set.

"I had just lost everything I owned but yet I couldn't do anything about it."

For a few days after the hurricane, Todd discovered the hard way how disaster erases all socio-economic lines.

While so many were asking where relief organizations were, the media rushed in to begin telling stories. It was through these new sets of eyes that Todd began to piece together a picture in his mind.

Fox News. CNN. The Weather Channel. Like many Americans, the Slacks and the other displaced survivors were glued to the television and the Internet.

"I was really thankful for the media coverage," Todd said, "very glad for it. You found yourself just mesmerized by these reports."

After the initial shock wore off – almost somewhat of an adrenaline rush – the

depression began to set in. Todd says Naomi, Victoria and Cooper were all frightened, comprehending it on different levels at varying ages. Luckily, the three had always been talkers and verbalized their feelings to their grandpa, a child psychologist.

That first week, Adrienne was working inhuman hours, using the Birmingham Federal Reserve Bank as a headquarters for all affected banks in the South. Not only was there no power at many, which prohibited people from simply stopping by the ATM, still more banks were damaged and not functioning at all. It was Adrienne's job to transfer funds to these banks or find a way around the problems.

A week after the storm, Todd received a call from one of the managing partners of his law firm. The lawyers were meeting the next day in New Roads, La., to discuss how the firm could get back on track. Although the offices were not lost

because of their placement in the building, there was still the matter of relocating. No one was doing business in the French Quarter.

In order to make the meeting 450 miles away, Todd had to leave in the next 30 minutes. His parents said they would stay another week. After Todd and Adrienne began to see some normalcy with their jobs, they realized they had to do the same for their children.

Todd called the school in the nearby suburb of Vestavia Hills, close to the apartment complex that Adrienne's bank had found for the family. "They were wonderful," he added, relieved that the kids could be back in school within the week and regain a sense of normalcy of their own.

The kids, however, had to deal with an uncertainty their parents didn't – meeting new people and making friends.

Any worries, to Todd and Adrienne's relief, were unfounded and soon dispelled, thanks to a caring school district and welcoming classmates.

Naomi, the oldest, would be starting seventh grade in her new middle school. A voracious reader and intellectually wise beyond her years, she was the one who had to put on a brave face for her younger siblings.

Fourth-grader Victoria, a bit quieter but every bit as pensive as her older sister, would be in the same school as Cooper, a kindergartner, proud to show off the gap where he had recently lost his two bottom teeth.

Todd took the two younger children into their school together, first to Cooper's classroom. Immediately, Cooper – who bears Adrienne's maiden name – was surrounded by his new classmates. His teacher bent down to his level and welcomed him to their class as the other kids brought him into the fold. They'd never met him but knew he'd had a rough couple of weeks.

"I saw my son's blond head, with this mob of little kids all around him." Todd got a lump in his throat, he said, and felt alright leaving Cooper while he walked Victoria to her class.

Victoria, the shyest of the three, was

greeted with a chorus of "hi" as she stood in the doorway. The teacher showed her to her desk, which was heaped with school supplies, purchased through a coin drive from her new classmates.

"It was really quite overwhelming," Todd said, "the generosity of people."

“Here I am, my wife and I successful professionals, reduced to homelessness and huge financial losses, standing in the Red Cross line, hoping for some assistance to put clothes on our children's backs.”

Todd Slack '90

Soon, more organized efforts came together to help the handful of families who had relocated to this suburb of Birmingham, about seven hours from New Orleans. It was a miniscule number compared to the 200,000 who had flooded into Houston. Likewise, the city of Baton Rouge literally doubled in population overnight.

Todd and Adrienne counted themselves lucky to have landed in the Birmingham area. Because the locale was not overloaded with evacuees, Alabama residents were able to do more to help these displaced families. Examples included free passes to zoos, movie theaters and museums, as well as 20-

percent discounts to stores to help with back-to-school shopping.

Despite the generosity, the costs of starting over, even temporarily, were piling up. The Slacks lived on credit cards for about three weeks. Their New Orleans bank had lost its entire data center so the first credit card bill was "obscene," Todd said, with hotel, food, clothes and gas charges adding up quickly.

Also that first month, Todd and Adrienne worked to make sure this temporary life did not feel "temporary." They found a church and got the girls involved in activities, such as gymnastics for Victoria and dance for Naomi. Cooper enrolled in a soccer clinic and scored two goals.

Todd began a new routine as well. He spent every other week working almost 500 miles away in New Roads. There, the employees formed a new family, keeping the firm alive, cooking together in the evenings and wondering where their lives would go.

These long drives, however, took a toll on Todd's SUV. To help, two of Todd's fraternity brothers who work in the auto industry shipped parts right to his door. In another instance, the Greek system came through for the Slacks again. In November, the Zeta Zeta Zeta sorority donated half the proceeds from its fall fund-raiser to the family.

See **SLACKS**, page 20

