

# Our View Turned

## Surviving the Louisiana Flood of 2016

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

On August 29, 2016, I received an email from Margaret Boudreaux [boo-DROH], a *Storyworks* teacher at Episcopal School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

“We have just suffered a great flood, a thousand-year flood,” she wrote. “Much of our school was damaged, and many of our students and teachers lost their homes.”

I had been reading about the devastating flooding that had struck Louisiana just weeks before. In the city of Baton Rouge, many areas were under 10 feet of water. Thousands of people had lost everything they owned.

But that was only one part of the story that Mrs. Boudreaux and her students wanted to share with me.

“This disaster brought out the good in people,” she wrote. “People rushed to help each other. My students and I invite you to visit us, to meet boys and girls who can tell you this story firsthand.”

And so last November, I flew down to Baton Rouge to meet the inspiring kids and teachers of Episcopal.

This is their story.

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# World to Water

You'll meet these amazing people in this story:



Addisyn



Dell



Skyler



Mrs. Boudreaux



**Main Idea and Supporting Details** As you read, think about how a community responded to a disaster.

**LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 10 WORDS IN BOLD**







eleven-year-old Addisyn Botos was up to her neck in freezing, filthy water.

It was August 13, 2016. Floods

were sweeping across Louisiana.

In Addisyn's Baton Rouge neighborhood, the waters had risen quickly. Now she and her parents, two brothers, and sister were trapped. They were caught outside their flooded house. Stinking brown water rushed all around them.

Addisyn gripped a wooden post so the strong **current** wouldn't sweep her away. The water got higher and higher.

"I've never been so scared," Addisyn says.

How would she and her family escape?

## A Rainy Morning

Two days earlier, few people in Baton Rouge could have imagined that their city would soon be in ruins.

It was Thursday, August 11. The sky was gray and rainy. But inside Episcopal School, the mood was sunny with excitement. It was orientation day. Students were there



The Botos's truck, after their escape.  
Top: A young man tries to save some of his belongings from the floodwaters.

to meet new teachers and catch up with old friends. They wore crisp blue and plaid uniforms. Their hair was combed and curled for pictures.

Addisyn was thrilled to start fifth grade. Sixth-grader Skyler Adams and his pals swapped stories of summer fun. Dell Portwood, 17, was eager for his senior year on the football team.

"We were all so happy to start school the next day," says Mrs. Boudreaux, who teaches fifth-grade language arts. "We weren't worried about a little rain," she adds.

What the teachers and students did not know was that the rain was part of a strange and dangerous storm system. Weather forecasters were growing more



ANNIE WENTZ/GETTY IMAGES (BACKGROUND); JONATHAN BAGSHAW/REUTERS (MANY); TRUCK PHOTO PROVIDED BY BOTOS FAMILY/TIM MUELLER/AP IMAGES FOR SCHOLASTIC INC.; JIM McMAHON/MAPMAN® (MAP)



Volunteers used their own boats to rescue people from flooded homes and roads.

But soon, even “safe” parts of the city would be in **grave** danger.

Skyler slept at a friend’s house. On Saturday morning, he woke up to the sound of his phone. It was a call from his mom.

“I’m outside,” she said. “The house is flooded. Everything is gone.”

In Dell’s neighborhood near Episcopal, water rushed through the streets. The school’s athletic fields turned into lakes.

The Botos family woke up to see water in their road. By 7 a.m., they decided to leave in their big pickup truck. They made it down the driveway. Then the water began to rise quickly.

“It just rushed in,” says Mrs. Botos.

The water caused the truck’s engine to die. Water gushed up through the bottom of the truck. “First our feet were wet,” Mrs. Botos says. “Then we had water up to our waists and then our chests.”

Being in a car or truck when even just a few inches of water are on a road can be dangerous. Two feet of water can lift a pickup or SUV and turn it on its side. The truck can be swept away like a bath toy. Water pushes against the doors. This can make them impossible to open. People get trapped inside. Every year, dozens of people in vehicles lose their lives trying to escape floods.

## Stranded

Luckily, Mrs. Botos managed to break a window. The kids in back got one of the truck doors open. Sixteen-year-old Marcus grabbed hold of 8-year-old Brennen. Addisyn held tight to her mom. Her dad freed their

and more alarmed. The rain was extremely heavy. It was as if millions of fire hoses were hanging from the sky, all turned on full blast.

Most worrisome? The storm was moving slowly. That meant it would hover over Baton Rouge, pouring down rain, for days.

That morning, the National Weather Service sent out a flash flood warning for parts of Baton Rouge. Flash floods happen when large amounts of rain fall over a short period of time. All of a sudden, lazy rivers and quiet streams become powerful **torrents** of rushing water. Each year, an average of 130 Americans die in flash floods.

## A Disaster Taking Shape

Already, two of Baton Rouge’s main rivers—the Amite [AY-meet] and the Comite [COH-meet]—were rising over their banks. Those rivers connect to many small **tributaries**—creeks and streams and brooks that squiggle into almost all corners of Baton Rouge. A disaster was taking shape.

The next day, Friday, most schools in Baton Rouge were closed because of flooded roads. Episcopal was one of them. But those who lived near Episcopal felt safe.

Dell lives near the school. “We had never flooded before,” he says.

Like Dell, Skyler lives in an area that had always been safe from flooding. Addisyn does too.



two dogs from their crates in the back. The family pushed their way through the deep water. They moved back toward the house. Mr. Botos got straps from his truck. He tied the people and dogs together so no one would be swept away.

They had escaped from the truck. But now they were stranded. And the water was rising.

Across the Baton Rouge area, emergency operators were getting frantic calls for help.

*“I’m stuck in my car!”*

*“We’re on the roof of our house!”*

*“Please help us!”*

From the sky, Baton Rouge seemed more like a lake than a city. Church steeples and rooftops poked out of the water. Partially **submerged** cars looked like sea creatures. In a nearby city, caskets from a flooded cemetery rose out of the soaked ground and floated down the streets.

## A Volunteer Navy

The Botos family huddled in the freezing water. It stank of oil and gas. And it was swarming with fire ants, which stung their arms and legs. Hours passed. There seemed to be no escape. No one came to help them. Rescue workers were overwhelmed. Fire trucks were stranded.

But soon the people of Baton Rouge began to **mobilize** to help each other. By mid-morning, a “navy” of volunteers had headed out in their own boats. Mrs. Boudreaux’s 22-year-old son, Elliott, was one of the volunteers. There were hundreds of



them. They plucked neighbors from rooftops and cars. They climbed through windows to help the elderly and disabled. They comforted crying children. They calmed nervous pets.

In one of these boats, a friend of Mrs. Botos’s rescued the family. They were taken to a gas station. When that area flooded, a second boat took them to a parking lot. Later that day, a huge army truck brought them to a fire station. Addisyn’s aunt picked them up from there.

It had been nearly nine hours. At last they were safe and dry.

## “What Can I Do?”

Even before the floodwaters cleared, the Episcopal School community was coming together. Those who had been spared flooding helped those in need. Dell’s family was lucky. Their house did not flood.

“All I could think was, how can I help?” Dell says. “What can I do? What can I do?”

The answer: a lot.

All across southern Louisiana, thousands of people’s homes were ruined. Many people lost everything they owned. Even a small



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The flood cleanup lasted for months, as people hauled trash from their damaged homes.

amount of water in a home can cause major damage. When the water **recedes**, it leaves behind mud, oil, dead worms, and more. Carpets must be ripped out and replaced. Damp and moldy walls must be **demolished**.

Students and teachers got to work. They helped people clean their homes, haul away trash, and **salvage** what they could. Donations poured in.

"It was amazing what people did for us," says Skyler. His home took months to repair.

### "That's Just Stuff" The Louisiana Flood



The Botos Family: Mallory, 13; Brennen, 8; Marcus, 16; Ben (dad), Addisyn, 12, and Michelle (mom).

of 2016 was the worst natural disaster in the U.S. since Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The storm dumped 3 feet of rain in some areas. That's three times as much as fell during Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Thirteen people died. About 143,000 homes flooded. More than a year later, many people still struggle with the losses they suffered. Nine schools in the area stayed closed all year. Thousands of students were crowded into schools far from their homes.

Compared with many others, the people of the Episcopal community were lucky. The school reopened a week after the flood. The gym and fields were repaired within months. Dell and the football team played a winning season. And neighbors continued to help neighbors.

The Botos family looks back on their experience mainly with **gratitude**. Addisyn lost some special things. She misses her jewelry, her dolls, and her Bible. But as her mom says, "That's just stuff."

"We've gained so much more than we lost," says Mrs. Botos. "The lessons we've learned are so amazing. We feel that we have been blessed beyond our imagination."

Addisyn agrees. "We are very lucky." ■

## WRITE TO WIN

Why does the Episcopal community feel lucky even though they lost so much? Send a letter explaining what you learned to "Flood Contest" by Nov. 1, 2017; we will forward it to Mrs. Boudreaux's students. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *I Survived Hurricane Katrina* by Lauren Tarshis. See page 2 for details.

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