

'This is indefinite'

I'm a refugee of Katrina in Dallas — jobless and homeless and I never could have imagined this

Last week, I was at home in New Orleans, living a normal life. Today I am living in a hotel in Dallas with my extended family. I've got no house, no job, no way to provide for myself and my family. I am a refugee. *Refugee* — the word is too painful and incredible to contemplate. But that's my life now.

How did we get here? It started on Sunday morning, when my sister and I packed up the kids and drove north ahead of the storm. We packed clothing only for three days, expecting that we'd be back home by Tuesday.

We drove toward Alexandria, La., knowing there was a shelter there. I'm a licensed clinical social worker, so I intended to check the family into a hotel, then head over to the shelter to volunteer my services. But there was no room. We drove on to Shreveport, but two hotels told us there were no more rooms anywhere in the state. So we ended up in Dallas just after midnight and fell into bed.

The next morning, I woke up to find my sister on the end of the bed watching Katrina make landfall on television. I was still detached from it. The way hurricanes are in New Orleans, we get water, but it recedes in a day or so, we clean up and go

back to our lives.

But the more we watched TV, the more the reality of what was happening began to sink in. My sister said, "Debra, do you realize we have no home to go back to?"

I'm homeless. I'm jobless. When we left New Orleans, my family understood that I was going to take care of everyone financially. Now I had to face the prospect of getting a job in Dallas simply to keep my family's heads above water.

I can't get to my résumé. I have no way to prove my credentials, to prove who I am and what I can do. I don't know anybody in this city. And I am not the only person going through this right now.

This is not for a couple of days. This is indefinite. For the first time in my life, I'm not sure what I'm going to do or where I'm going to go. Being in this situation is disconcerting, because as a social worker, I've been the one to give help. So this is humbling.

I jokingly refer to the way I handle crises as the Scarlett O'Hara Syndrome. I don't sit around feeling sorry for myself. I make an action plan and get busy. You can do that when you have normality in other areas of your life, but for the first time, all my defenses have been compromised.

No matter how much you imagine what it would be like to be in a situation like this, you can't really know the magnitude of the challenge until it happens to you. In a single day, all of my support network — family, friends, job, everything else — was gone. When we get through this, it will leave me even more dedicated to helping others.

We can't do anything about what's going on in New Orleans, but we can help ourselves here in Dallas. My nephew is with us. He's a sous-chef back home, and he went out looking on Wednesday for a job here. A restaurant hired him as a host, seating people for \$5 an hour, with shared tips. He grabbed that. It's a start.

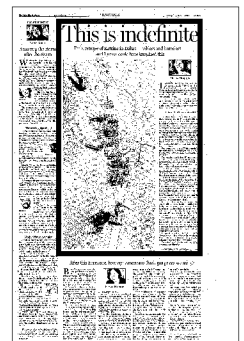
I'm spending my days trying to find a job. We've always worked. That's what we know how to do. We want to help ourselves and find a decent place to live until we can go back. If we go back.

We're dealing with the here and now. After all, tomorrow is another day.

Debra Morton is temporarily living in a Dallas motel with her sister and six children. You may e-mail her in care of displaced@dallasnews.com.



DEBRA MORTON







Staff photo

Other New Orleans residents wait to be evacuated from a strip of land surrounded by water.