

TCNJ shares shelter and classrooms with a number of 'Katrina' victims

Following the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans' colleges and universities, TCNJ allowed New Jersey students there to consider enrolling here. About 10 did and here's a sampling of their experiences.



Dontreale Bridgeforth, a sophomore business major, from Trenton.

When Dontreale Bridgeforth, a second-year student at Dillard University in New Orleans, was she told she had three hours to evacuate, she panicked.

"At first, my three roommates and I had no idea what to do," she said. "My friend realized she shouldn't leave her car in New Orleans, so instead of taking the bus to Shreveport with the other students, we drove to La Place."

The drive normally would take 30 minutes, but it took them seven hours to make it and learn La Place, too, was under evacuation orders. They drove another 17 hours to Houston, TX, where Bridgeforth's sister lives. Then, when they realized their displacement would last much longer than five days, they drove yet another 13 hours to an aunt's house in Killeen, TX, where four people could be more comfortable.

On September 6, a week after the hurricane, they learned Dillard would be closed for at least another two weeks. She and her friends then decided to find other schools to attend in the interim.

That same day, she flew to Philadelphia, where her grandmother, who lives in Trenton, picked her up. Bridgeforth had grown up in New Orleans but moved to Trenton with her parents a few years ago. She graduated from Ewing High School in 2004.

Bridgeforth quickly applied to TCNJ and settled into her business classes, which have been manageable for her so far. She also works part-time to help pay for more clothes and to save money for what she estimates she lost to the floods and fires at Dillard. "I still won't know for a while what I lost. If I wanted to go back now, I would need a military escort," she added.

Although her parents would like her to stay at TCNJ, she plans to return to Louisiana when Dillard reopens with the help of Tulane University in January. "I am definitely going back. New Orleans is my home," she said.

Nicole Kukawski '06

Ryan Doyle, an open options major from Medford Lakes, tells his own story:

I was at the airport a day before my

orientation, when I first heard that Katrina was heading toward New Orleans. I wasn't too worried, because just a day or two earlier, forecasters predicted it would hit the Florida panhandle. So on Saturday, August 27, my parents and I headed uptown to move me into Tulane. We doubted the school would close.

I was about to sign in at my dorm when someone standing on a table announced that the university was going to close at 4 P.M., and would reopen next Wednesday for classes. Our orientation would be held the next weekend. But I moved my things in and went across campus to pick up things I had shipped earlier. Signs all over the place announced a meeting with President Cowen about an evacuation plan. He tried to calm our worries, humorously promised this would be "the most memorable college orientation ever," and laid out plans for temporary relocation elsewhere.

I'm lucky to have a cousin who's a captain at Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, LA, and we were able to stay with him for a few days before getting a flight home from Houston. I had less than a week's worth of clothing with me. Most of my belongings were, and are, still at Tulane.

I was *very against* applying to other schools. I guess I was in denial about the situation. When it became clear Tulane wasn't an option for the fall, I was offered admission to the University of Pennsylvania and TCNJ. I chose TCNJ over Penn because, even though Penn offered free tuition, TCNJ offered housing, and I didn't want to lose my freshman-year experience.

So far, I love TCNJ. I've made very close friends, and I've especially bonded with my floor. I'll be returning to Tulane in the spring though. I don't want a hurricane to change my college plans,

plus it will be a historical experience living in New Orleans during its reconstruction. But leaving here will be a lot harder than I anticipated.

John Gagliardi, an open options major from Hasbrouck Heights:

John's original college plans included, among other things, moving far away from home. But those plans changed when Hurricane Katrina forced administrators to close Tulane University for the fall semester. "We knew as soon as the hurricane hit that Tulane wouldn't be an option anytime soon," he said.

While rushing to leave New Orleans after the evacuation order, Gagliardi didn't have time to give his education much thought. He left his laptop and other belongings behind and, after several days on the road, settled in at his roommate's house in Texas, and began considering his college options.

"A lot of schools were getting the word out that they would give kids displaced by Katrina an opportunity to apply for admission," said Gagliardi. In addition to TCNJ, he applied to Rutgers, University of Maryland, and Columbia. "TCNJ appealed to me most because I had heard a lot of good things about it from friends, and it happened to be close to where I live."

Gagliardi found the transition to be fairly easy. "I've had a really great experience here so far. I've met a lot of cool people, especially in my dorm. There's a lot of love on my floor and we have a really great time together." Though Gagliardi is enjoying his time here, don't expect to see him around campus in the spring. "Even though I love TCNJ," he said, "I can't wait to get back to New Orleans."

Nicole Levins '07