

Our World Turned to Water

by Lauren Tarshis

E

leven-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.

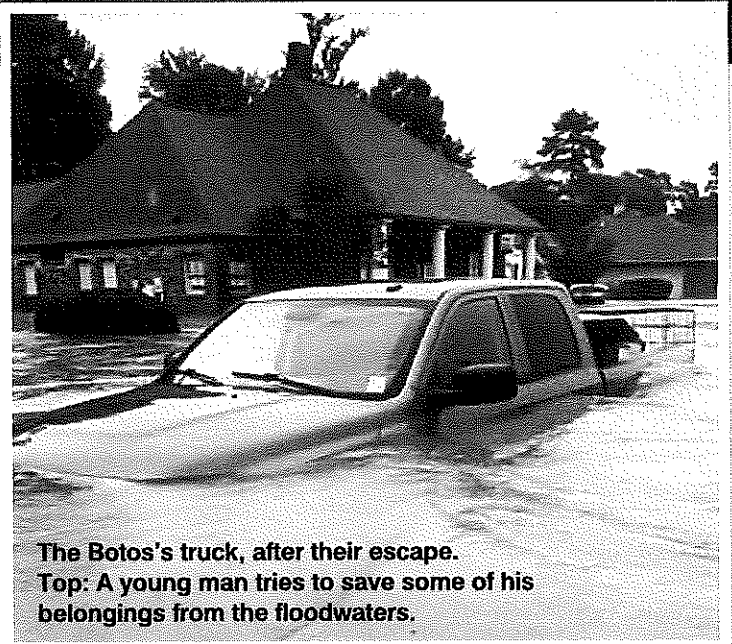
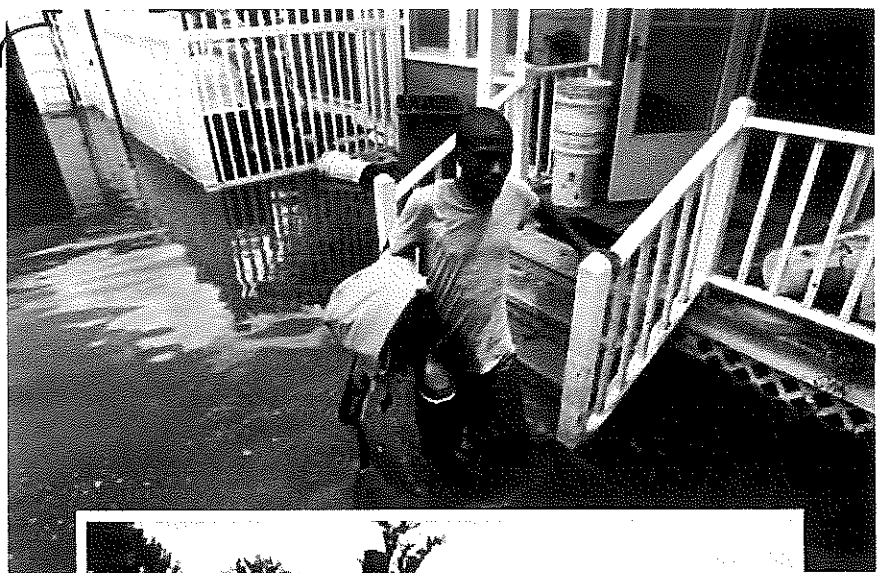
"I've never been so scared," Addisyn says.

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



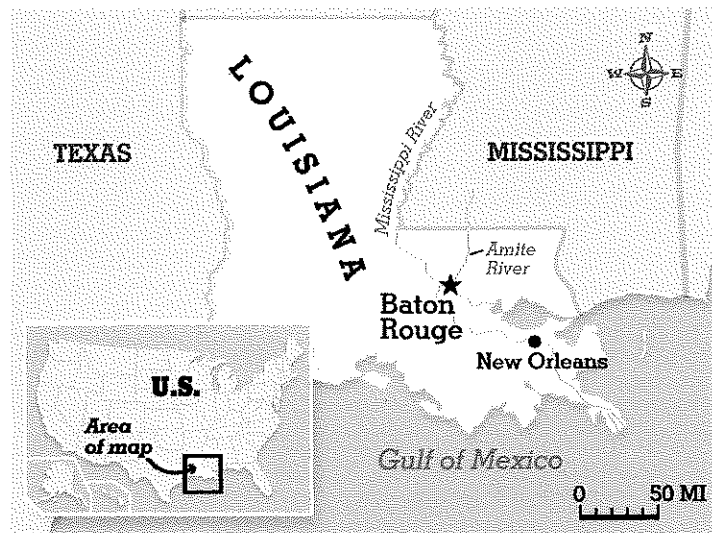
The Botos's truck, after their escape. Top: A young man tries to save some of his belongings from the floodwaters.

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.

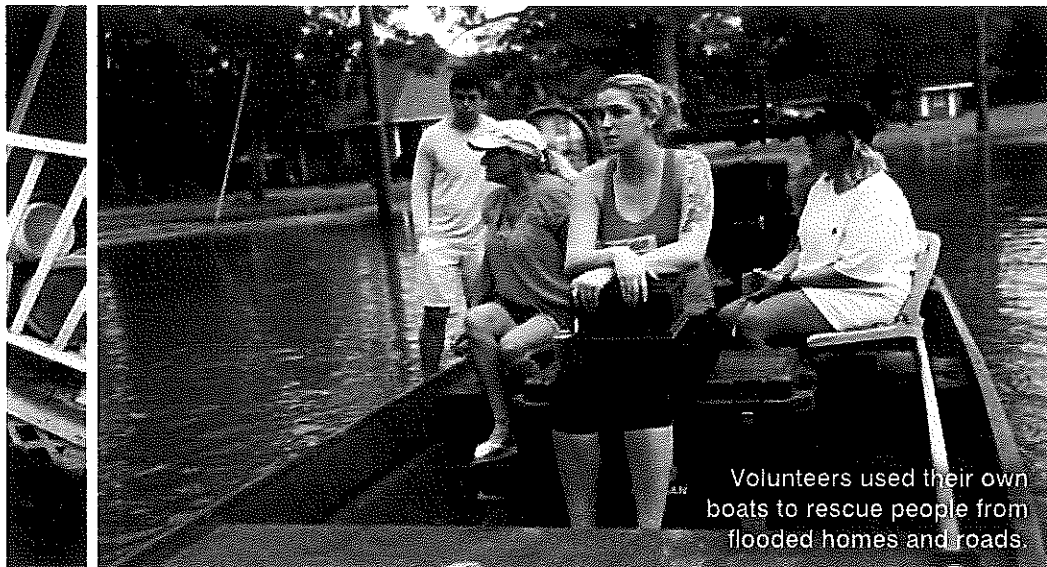
Addisyn was thrilled to start fifth grade. Sixth-grader Skyler Adams and his pals swapped stories of summer fun. Dell Portwood, 17, was eager for his senior year on the football team.

"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



ANNE WENTZEL/GETTY IMAGES (BACKGROUND); JONATHAN BACHMAN/REUTERS (MAN); TRUCK PHOTO PROVIDED BY BOTOS FAMILY/VTM MUELLER/AP IMAGES FOR SCHOLASTIC INC.; JIM MCMAHON/AP IMAGES (MAP)



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

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

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

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.

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

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



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

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.

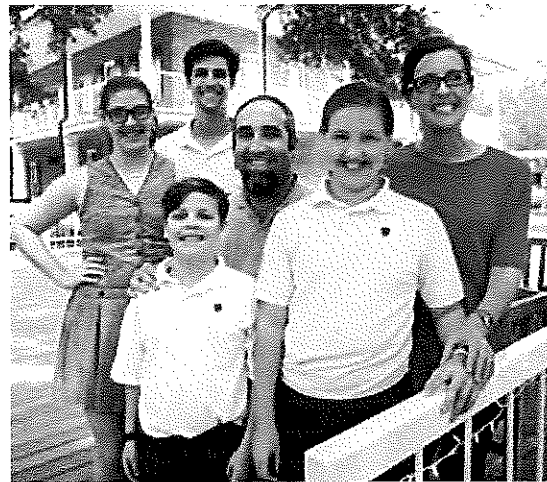
Compared with many others, the people of the Episcopal community were lucky. The school reopened a week after the flood. The gym and fields were repaired within months. Dell and the football team played a winning season. And neighbors continued to help neighbors.

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." ■



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

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

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.

FIND AN
ACTIVITY
ONLINE!



Name: _____ Date: _____

Writing a Summary

A summary is a short retelling of the most important parts of a story. It should include the information that someone would need to know to understand the story, without minor details or your own opinion.

Directions: Complete the summary below, using the prompts in the margins to help you.

Summary of "Our World Turned to Water"

"Our World Turned to Water" is about _____

The flood was caused by _____

The floodwaters rushed in quickly, causing dangerous situations such as _____

With the lives of many people in danger, hundreds of volunteers _____

The flood was the worst natural disaster in America since 2012, causing tragedies like _____

When people were able to return to their homes, many were upset to find _____

But the people in the Episcopal School community were fortunate because _____

1. Begin with a topic sentence that tells what the article is mainly about.

2. What weather conditions led to the flash flood?

3. What happened to people when the water quickly rose?

4. What did volunteers do to help people trapped by the flood?

5. How many people died, and how many homes were flooded?

6. What happened to the belongings and homes of many people?

7. What are two reasons they felt lucky?