

Escaping Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

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I am 23 years old and have spinal muscular atrophy. When I was five years old, I had a bad case of pneumonia and was trached. I now use an LP6 (Puritan Bennett).

Before Hurricane Katrina, I had my own van and motorized wheelchair and was living on my own in an apartment supplied by House of Choice. It was the agency that also supplied my personal care attendants, who had been taking care of me around the clock.

Just before Katrina hit, I had a new aide named Willie Lee Cargo; she started working for me the month before.



Willie Lee and Jon

At first, House of Choice was considering not evacuating, but I managed to convince them to evacuate me to my dad's house in Winnie, Texas, located between Houston and Port Arthur. Willie, her daughter and I left the next day, driving from 9 a.m. that Sunday to 2 a.m. Monday morning. My ventilator was powered by an external battery and an electric generator, enough for the long drive.

(It was a good thing that we left, because my apartment in New Orleans was completely flooded and is uninhabitable.)

We all stayed at my dad's now very crowded house. A week went by, and Willie did not have any time off from her attendant duties for me.

If I hadn't been able to talk, I would have been in a lot of trouble, because Ms. Willie was still learning how to take care of a ventilator user.

She eventually found a house in Texas, and let me move in with her.

When Hurricane Rita hit, we had to evacuate again—this time to Kerrville, Texas. We had to stay about three weeks. When we returned, we were relieved that there was no damage to Willie's house.

In all this time, Willie has not been paid for anything she has done or been given any kind of help with me. She says she doesn't want to ever go back to Louisiana, but that we will definitely keep in touch with each other.

I am moving into my own apartment in St. Rose, near Kenner, Louisiana, in the next month. An agency called AAA Your Choice will provide my new attendants.

I hope life gets back to normal. ▲

Tropical Storm Katrina formed over the Caribbean on August 23, 2005.

On Monday, August 29, Hurricane Katrina, a category four storm, passed over the eastern edge of New Orleans.

The eye of Hurricane Rita hit land in extreme southwestern Louisiana on Saturday, September 24, 2005.