

Kay Kuzma · Brenda Walsh

**BETWEEN
HELL
»»»»»»»» and ««««««««
HIGH WATER**

[God Was There]

**Survival Stories From
Hurricane Katrina**



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—Introduction—

It wasn't on our agendas. On Monday, September 12, 2005 (just two weeks after Katrina), Danny Shelton, president of Three Angels Broadcasting Network, called from Waveland, Mississippi, where the network was taping material for broadcast. "There's an incredible story here," Danny told us. "Stories of God's power and protection and of the miracles that are continuing to happen as volunteers unselfishly meet the needs of survivors. A book needs to be written. Will you please come?"

We really didn't want to. Writing about hurricanes was outside our comfort zone. But feeling called, we cancelled trips and found a support system to take over our home duties, and three days later we were headed to the Gulf Coast.

As we neared the end of our nine-hour journey from Knoxville to Bass Memorial Academy at Lumberton, Mississippi, the headquarters of ACTS, a disaster relief organization, we prayed: "OK, God, we don't know how to go about this. You're going to have to open the way. Please lead us to the people who have stories You want told." We don't think the devil was very happy with this arrangement. Two hours after we arrived—and one hour into our first interview—a call came from

Kay's daughter. "Daddy has fallen and may have a hairline hip fracture. Mom, I think you should come home!" Two hours later, Kay was on her way home to care for her husband, leaving Brenda alone with recording equipment and cameras—and the putrid smells of muck and mold; the nasty love bugs, flies, and mosquitoes; and daytime temperatures of 104 degrees.

But God was still in charge and leading each step of the way. The injury that Kay's husband sustained was not as serious as first feared. And Brenda was led to one incredible story after another.

In the following pages you will read these gripping accounts of how people survived the worst hurricane in United States history—and the sorrowful stories of those who did not. You'll learn how God was working amazing miracles in the midst of the storm. You'll be held spellbound as you read how a former NFL football player tried desperately to keep alive his mother, who was trapped in

a New Orleans hospital on life-support, and how he feared for his own life at the Superdome. Then there's the heart-wrenching account of being buried under water for thirty minutes with only a PVC pipe to breathe through, or the lady who couldn't swim who was swept away by the violent flood waters, frantically grabbing tree branches and all the time unable to shake off the rats who clung to her back! And through it all, between hell and high water, *God was there!*



Kay was able to stay in Lumberton, Mississippi, only a few hours before having to leave to care for a family emergency.

—Chapter 1—

Interstate 10: Highway to Hell

“They’re killing us!”

—Phyllis Delone

Interstate 10 is the southern-most east-west, coast-to-coast interstate highway in the United States. It stretches from California’s Santa Monica beach, through Phoenix and on to Texas, linking El Paso, San Antonio, and Houston before it leaves the wide-open, dry, desertlike spaces of the West and plunges into the swamps, lakes, and bayous of the Deep South on its way to New Orleans. When it reaches the Big Easy, I-10 becomes *the longest series of viaducts passing over water* anywhere in the world as it races over Lake Pontchartrain to Slidell, Louisiana. Then it quickly exits the urban area for the forests that lie just north of Mississippi’s Gulf Coast towns—Waveland, Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian, Gulfport, and Biloxi—that make up what some call the “Redneck Riviera” with their powdery white sand beaches and offshore casinos. After Mobile, Alabama, the highway runs through the woodlands that dominate the rest of its eastward journey, until 2,460 miles later, I-10 rolls into Jacksonville, Florida, and greets the Atlantic.

Why Interstate 10?

Why do we start our story with I-10? It isn’t because this highway is a lifeline connection between major U.S. cities, although it is. But we

begin here because I-10 is intimately connected to Katrina—the Category Four hurricane that slammed into the Gulf Coast in the early morning hours of Monday, August 29, 2005. Katrina was one of the worst natural disasters that has ever hit the United States, making useless debris out of high-end Gulf Coast resorts that are no more. Gone are the quaint little towns with their graceful antebellum homes, the mom and pop souvenir shops and seafood cafes along Highway 90; gone are the infrastructure, the businesses, the majority of people—and the children. Some people left by choice—they were the lucky ones. The others either survived miraculously—as you will see in the stories you’re about to read—or they didn’t. The sad fact is that hundreds didn’t make it as the rising flood waters trapped them in their attics and slowly sucked the air from their lungs. Or the winds tore down their shelters and exposed the old, the young, the crippled, the sick, and the weak to the cruelest of the elements and then washed them away to their deaths.

Through the years, I-10 has meant safety for the Mississippi Gulf Coast residents. Regardless of a hurricane’s strength, most residents knew that if they could get to the interstate, they’d be OK. It was built north of the coastal flood zone, so no one expected waves to wash over its asphalt. But then, no one expected Katrina’s mammoth waves riding on thirty-foot storm surges, pushed by 175 mile-per-hour winds.

Thirty-six years ago Hurricane Camille ravaged the Gulf Coast. And a year before Katrina, Ivan licked at I-10, taking out a small part at the causeway over Escambia Bay near Pensacola, Florida. But apart from a few wash-outs, I-10 has stood proudly through the threatening tropical winds and rain that pelt the coast every year during the summer hurricane season. It stood, that is, until Katrina, when the headlines announced, “I-10 Twin Spans Across Lake Pontchartrain Collapse.”

In addition to the demise of I-10 over the Louisiana waterways, major sections of the eastbound lanes in Mississippi, especially between Gulfport and Biloxi, were damaged and impassable because of storm debris. People expected the winds. They expected the trees to snap,

making passage impossible until someone chain-sawed or bulldozed their way through. But no one expected the water! The storm surge left downtown Gulfport under ten feet of water. Not only were the coastal communities flooded, but streets and homes were under water as far as six miles inland! Residents around Diamondhead, Mississippi, now recognize I-10 as the boundary between the total wasteland on the south and partially standing, twisted buildings that might possibly be salvaged on the north.

Residents of New Orleans thought they were home safe; that they would sustain only wind damage. Then Monday afternoon the Seventeenth Street levee and the Industrial Canal levee began buckling and then broke under the relentless pounding and pressure of Katrina's storm surge, putting most of the city and the surrounding parishes under as much as twenty-six feet of toxic, polluted seawater and forcing thousands to flee from their homes and take refuge in places like the Superdome, the convention center, and the elevated portions of I-10.

The Horror of I-10's Asphalt Camp

And so we begin this journey between hell and high water in New Orleans, five days after the storm, atop a stretch of I-10 where an asphalt camp is inhabited by more than three hundred New Orleanians displaced by Katrina. Most thought that by climbing the exit ramps they could escape the hell they had lived through in the Superdome, where they rode out the



Included in the aftermath of Katrina were miles of wrecked and flooded automobiles, leaving the landscape looking like a battle zone.



Many survivors returned to find virtually nothing was left standing in their former neighborhoods—only rubble and destruction.

the water receded enough for trucks to haul them to the morgue. The survivors had little choice but to climb the exit ramps, hoping for fresh air, food, water, and evacuation.

That was Day 2—or for some, Day 3. But the days passed, and no



Others returned to homes that were still standing but uninhabitable due to flood damage by toxic, polluted seawater.

help came. Babies cried, the elderly moaned in pain, nerves jangled, throats parched, stomachs growled, skin burned. Then there were the sick—and the dying. They were running out of medicine, patience—and hope.

Day 4 came and went. Still no help. Where were the buses that had been promised to come and take

them to a better land—anyplace that would offer food, water, and shelter from the oppressive heat? Now, insect infested, sweat soaked, starving, and dehydrated, they watched the lives of their family members ebb away under the scorching sun.

The scene looked like one from some third-world country: dirty barefoot children in sagging diapers, torn clothing, soiled blankets, the elderly in wheelchairs with swollen ankles, a rusty bicycle tipped on its side, trash littering the site, and one overflowing portable toilet. But this was not somewhere in the third world. This was America. This was New Orleans, the very harbor that in 1951 had offered sixteen-year-old Jan Kuzma and his family a safe place to enter a country that they were told “flowed with milk and honey.” This was America the beautiful, a place to live in freedom and grow up with plenty after having suffered the deprivation and ravages of World War II in occupied Poland.

But the city that had opened her arms to the Kuzma family more than fifty years earlier was a far cry from the city that now could not even take care of her own.

How had three hundred New Orleans residents ended up trying to survive on an elevated portion of I-10? Forty-three-year-old Rickey Brock’s story is similar to that of many who were told on Sunday—the day before the storm—to evacuate. “We couldn’t evacuate,” says Rickey. “I’ve got a truck, but it ain’t runnin’, and I don’t have insurance.” He and his family had no choice but to hunker down and hold



Hurricane Katrina, one of the worst hurricanes in history, smashed into the Gulf Coast with winds up to 175 m.p.h., leaving countless scenes of destruction.

on as they were hit by one of the worst hurricanes in history. They made it through the eye of the storm, but when the water started rising, they found a rowboat and paddled their way out of their neighborhood along Dorgenois Street. They headed to the Superdome but were too late, so for the first two nights they slept under the interstate.

Now, on top of I-10, Rickey and his fellow refugees tried to adjust to their new situation. Some slept under plastic tarps; others built makeshift shanties to protect them from the blazing Louisiana sun. Some draped sheets over stacks of the blue plastic containers that typically held five gallons of water. One group of more than a dozen stretched out in single file across I-10 to squeeze under the narrow band of shade from highway signs. They hung laundry—still soiled—over the concrete barriers. They smoked and paced and complained and stared into space and wondered if their loved ones were still alive. They recounted ghoulish tales of hearing trapped people pounding and yelling from the attics of their homes as the floodwaters slowly took their lives—and of the floating bodies, the terror, the stench of foul water, the cry of the relentless wind. And they pleaded with the occasional passerby to take the phone numbers of relatives and call for help.

“They’re killing us!” said forty-six-year-old Phyllis Delone, voicing the lament of many who expected relief by the Red Cross and rescue by FEMA,¹ But on Day 5 there was still little hope to offer these people, other than the promise that buses were on the way.

Then they came—a steady stream of emergency vehicles, ambulances, police cruisers, and a ten-truck national guard convoy. But instead of stopping to help those camped on I-10, the vehicles navigated around them. “Overhead, helicopters roared,” writes Ceci Connolly, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, “some landing between the Superdome and I-10. A giant Huey military transport helicopter hung above for fifteen minutes, its mission unclear. Then it finally moved on. Clouds of dust and debris swept over the crowd.”²

As night came on, those that could slept fitfully; babies whimpered, the angry cursed, the devout prayed, the sick got sicker . . . and the weakest died.

When No One Seems to Care

It's not a pretty picture, is it! Surviving the terror of the storm and thinking you're safe, only to find yourself helplessly stranded on an elevated portion of I-10, dying a little bit each day because there's no one to bring you a morsel of food to quell your pains of hunger or a drink of pure water for your cracked lips and parched throat. No one to shield you from the burning rays of sun. No one to rescue you from your pain and misery. No one to quiet your fears of the unknown. No one to reassure you that your family and friends are safe and that your children are alive. And there's absolutely nothing you can do to save yourself.

The fact is, most of us think we're living "north of I-10." We're safe! We're not going to get caught in the storms of life. Bad things happen to other people, not to us. Other people suffer, other people get hurt, sick, lost, and abused. Other people have to endure pain, worry, anxiety, paranoia, fear, and frustration. Not us. We know a time of trouble—such as never before—is coming. But we somehow think ourselves magically immune. We read stories of other people who have found themselves trapped "between hell and high water," but not us. We're lukewarm; we have credit cards and pocket money, and although we may want lots of things, we're pretty much in need of nothing (see Revelation 3:16, 17).

FLASH! "I-10 Collapses!" "I-10 Is Underwater!" "Sections of I-10 Are Washed Away." Your comfortable world is suddenly turned upside down. How do you survive when you're flooded out of your comfort zone? How do you keep optimistic when your world seems to be a floating mass of debris? How do you go on when you are enduring such intense emotional and physical pain that all hope is lost?

The sad news is that most of the Katrina victims who put their faith in human beings were bitterly disappointed. But there need be

no disappointment with God. No matter how dire your circumstances, He can rescue you. And even though help may seem far away, with God there is always hope.

Here's the good news:

O LORD, You are my God.
I will exalt You,
I will praise Your name,
For You have done wonderful things. . . .
For You have been a strength to the poor,
A strength to the needy in his distress,
A refuge from the storm,
A shade from the heat. . . .

He will swallow up death forever,
And the LORD God will wipe away tears from all faces. . . .

And it will be said in that day:
Behold, this is our God;
We have waited for Him, and He will save us.
This is the LORD;
We have waited for Him;
We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation
(Isaiah 25: 1, 4, 8, 9, NKJV).

1. FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) is the agency of the United States government under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security whose mandate it is to provide disaster relief.

2. Ceci Connolly, "Frustration Grows In Days Stranded On Interstate 10," *Washington Post*, Sept. 3, 2005, A13.