

## SAMPLE FEATURE STORY

*A feature story explores a news issue from a very particular angle. It is based on extensive research and interviewing. .*

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### *The Long Road Home*

In New Orleans, families struggle to return to normal one year after Hurricane Katrina.

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Chakia Boutte, 12, surveys what she has lost in the year since Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast. The playground where she once spent afternoons is closed. Her block is full of storm-wrecked homes, many abandoned. A pile of charred debris sits in front of what used to be Chakia's house. The home was looted and burned after her family evacuated in a rescue boat.

"I cried when I saw my house," she says, remembering the first time she returned home after the storm. "[Looters] took everything, even my jar of pennies."

Chakia and her cousin Mikia Kirton, 8, have lived in Houston since the storm forced their families to move. The girls dreaded returning to school this fall. They say other kids sometimes make

fun of them. "They say, 'You used to have a home, now you live in the Astrodome,'" says Mikia. After Hurricane Katrina, thousands of evacuees had to take shelter at the Houston Astrodome.

After spending time in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, Toye Domino is happy to be starting fifth grade in New Orleans. "We had to travel halfway around the country to get back here," says Toye, 10. "I want to stay here because it's my hometown."

For kids in New Orleans, the start of school is a welcome sign of normalcy. One year ago, their lives were forever altered by Hurricane Katrina. More than 1,300 people died because of the Aug. 29, 2005, storm. About 770,000 people were displaced and evacuees scattered across the country.

"New Orleans has changed a lot," says Myeisha McDaniels, 13, whose family has moved back to the city. "Almost everyone I knew is gone."

This fall, about 56 of the city's 128 public schools will be open. Officials expected about 30,000 students, down from pre-Katrina enrollment of 60,000. The routine of the school day seems to help returning students cope, says Desmond Moore, an English teacher at Harriet Tubman Elementary School. "The kids are adjusting," he says. "It really feels normal to them to be back in school."

Still, there are challenges. The school doesn't have Internet access. Even basic supplies, such as textbooks and paper, can be scarce. "It forces you to do a little bit more with less," says Moore.

### **Rebuilding—slowly**

Government spending for relief and recovery is nearing \$100 billion, but the pace of rebuilding has been uneven. In some places, such as the Mississippi coast, progress is evident.

Piles of debris have been cleared, and homes and businesses are being repaired or rebuilt. Hotel casinos have reopened, boosting the economy.

The picture is different in New Orleans. Parts of the city look as though Katrina passed through one month, rather than one year, ago. Neighborhoods that were hardest hit by floods, such as the Lower Ninth Ward, remain in ruins. The stench of mold and rotting garbage (locals call it “the Katrina smell”) hangs in the air. Rusted cars and uprooted trees line the streets. Guttered homes bear the scars of Katrina: watermarks and spray-painted symbols left by search teams. The remnants of people’s lives—a high school volleyball trophy, water-damaged family photos, a lone sneaker—are strewn about the mostly deserted streets.

About half of the former population of 450,000 has returned to the city. Because few housing options are available, rents have risen an estimated 25 to 30 percent. To encourage more people to come back, Louisiana developed a \$9 billion hurricane recovery program. However, the federal government only recently allocated enough money to fully fund the program.

In July, New Orleans officials announced the Unified New Orleans Plan. It calls for each city neighborhood to devise a rebuilding plan. Those plans will be combined with a citywide infrastructure plan to create a final rebuilding strategy. Meanwhile, the roads are full of potholes, and street signs point in every direction. Power outages are frequent. Many hospitals, banks, churches, and grocery stores remain shuttered.

“We’re recovering slowly,” New Orleans City Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell says with a sigh. “Like a cancer patient.”

### **Strong roots**

For those who lived through it, the memories of Hurricane Katrina remain fresh. Myeisha recalls being stuck in traffic trying to leave New Orleans before the storm. “The wind started blowing. The car started shaking. I thought we were going to die.” Even now, Myeisha says, “I get scared when it rains.”

Teachers and students draw strength from a poster in the Sophie B. Wright Charter School office. It shows a storm-damaged tree and includes a quote from the poet George Herbert that reads, “Storms make the oak grow deeper roots.” That’s the way many returning New Orleanians say they feel. “We want to think about how we survived, how we overcame,” says Moore, “and how we’re overcoming.”

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