



6 Young Survivors Relive Hurricane Katrina, The Storm That Changed Their Lives Forever

Ten years after one of the deadliest storms in U.S. history, survivors open up to MTV News.

by **mtv news staff** 7h ago

By *Channing Joseph*

Ten years ago this week on August 23, Hurricane Katrina was born above the warm, blue seas that surround the Bahamas. Before long, the newborn storm was a 400-mile-wide cyclone headed for the Gulf Coast, and in its eight days of life before dissipating over the Great Lakes, it became "the costliest and **one of the five deadliest hurricanes** to ever strike the United States."

The devastation that Katrina brought has had a lasting impact on the region, particularly New Orleans. Even a decade later, that impact is still deeply felt, especially by people who were either children or teenagers at the time of the disaster. Many of those young people say that the horrifying things that they experienced and witnessed during the storm and its aftermath have gotten almost no attention from the media or from the adults in their lives.

Of the dozen or survivors MTV News interviewed for this story — six are featured — none said they'd had any long-term professional counseling or therapy to help them cope with their trauma. In fact, many of the youth affected by Katrina say they've rarely spoken about their experiences with *anyone*.

follow **mtv issues** (40k)

trending in issues

6 Young Survivors Relive Hurricane Katrina, The Storm That Changed Their Lives Forever
7h ago

John Green Is Using His Birthday To Decrease Worldsuck And You Can Too
10h ago

13 Times Rowan Blanchard Gave Your Feminist Heart The Swoonies
8h ago

No-Fail Ways To Kick Anxiety's Ass On Your First Day Of College
16h ago

How Trans Girl Next Door' And Other LGBT Comics Are Actually Saving Kids' Lives
8/21/2015



Their stories can be harrowing, like that of Jaimie Cummings, who at 14 was trapped by flooding in a New Orleans hospital. "There were police officers coming in boats to get as many people as they could," Cummings told MTV News. "And dead bodies from the cemetery were floating in the water, along with other people who had just drowned."

Although a 2011 [report](#) by the National Hurricane Center found that 1.2 million people had been under some type of order to evacuate, Cummings — whose mother had been in the hospital when the storm came — was among the thousands of people who stayed behind. Many did so by choice because they had believed the danger was being overblown. Others who were poor, elderly or disabled either had had nowhere to go or no means of getting there.

Most of those who did escape left in a rush, taking only the essentials because they mistakenly assumed that they'd be able to return in just a few days.

"My mom came through and said we had to pack one bag," Tra'Nique Crawford, 25, remembered.

In the end, at least [1,833 people](#) across five Southern states lost their lives in Katrina's powerful winds and floods.



Survivor Krista Knauer in 2006

As it all unfolded, millions of Americans — and others around the world — were glued to their TVs, stunned by the apocalyptic footage of survivors clinging to life on the roofs of buildings as they waited for rescuers that seemed impossibly slow in coming.

Could this really be happening in America? many asked themselves in disbelief.

In the years following the devastation, the effects that the storm and its aftermath have had on young people have gone largely overlooked.

"There weren't many projects or resources geared to youth to provide counseling or even conversations about what they have experienced," Edward Buckles, 23, a New Orleans teacher and filmmaker, told MTV News. Edward is now working on a documentary, "Katrina Babies," to give young survivors like himself, who have felt neglected or ignored, a voice. "Most of the people that are in my film have never spoken about Hurricane Katrina, not even to our parents," he said. "The adults were given the attention."

The young people who spoke to MTV for this article all said the hurricane had changed their lives forever.

But, miraculously, the survivors also believe the disaster has had at least some positive effects on their lives. What follows are just a few of those stories.

1

Edward Buckles, 23, a high school teacher and filmmaker living in Uptown New Orleans



"Like most hurricanes in the city, young people were really excited to miss school and go on a weekend vacation," Edward recalled.

The Storm: Thirteen years old at the time and living in nearby Gretna, Louisiana, Edward evacuated with 10 family members and a dog and ended up in Lafayette, Louisiana, where they all piled in with his older sister's college friends. His uncle Kevin Thomas, a detective in the New Orleans Police Department, stayed behind to help protect the city from looters and other criminals.

"When we got to Lafayette, [the lady we were going to be staying with] scared the living daylights out of us because she told us that everybody that was left in the city was dead."

Fortunately, it wasn't true, but ... Edward's uncle, Detective Thomas, was **shot in the head** while attempting to arrest two suspects in a store robbery in New Orleans. Though he survived the shooting, he has been permanently disabled.

In addition, Edward himself often had to cope with it all on his own, with no adult help.

"I did not receive any counseling or therapy following Hurricane Katrina," he said. "I do think it should have been provided ... but the children were just sent to [a] new school and expected to be fine."

The Calm: "This Hurricane Katrina experience really stayed with me because I probably wouldn't have even been exposed to the arts. Once Katrina hit, I was forced to go to a different school. ... I was playing football, and I got hurt, so I joined the theater program," he said.

Subsequently, Edward went on to film studies at Dillard University, graduating this year. He has interned with director Spike Lee, and this year, his short film "Just Another Nigga?" — inspired by the Michael Brown case in Ferguson — was screened at Cannes, where it received a jury prize in the Diversity in Cannes Short Film Showcase.

"Fate and destiny worked through Hurricane Katrina," he said. "It created a path for me."



Cummings (left) and her mother in 2015

"The day before the storm hit, my mom was in the hospital [at Memorial Baptist] with stomach issues," Jaimie told MTV News. "She was heavily sedated and didn't know what was going on."

The Storm: Fourteen-year-old Jaimie and her mother had been living with her aunt in the 17th Ward of New Orleans. While visiting with her mother in the hospital room on the fourth floor, Jaimie heard the rain and the wind.

Then suddenly, the phones and power went out.

"The windows were breaking," she recalled. "They were moving bed-ridden patients into the hallways. The nurses were crazy. They were in panic mode. They were giving people medicine they didn't need."

"They're going to die anyway," she overheard one nurse saying.

After hearing that, when a nurse came in and tried to give Jaimie's mother a mysterious pill, Jaimie ordered her mom not to swallow it. But as other patients began to die, visitors were ordered to leave the building, despite having nowhere to go and being surrounded by flooding on all sides. Jaimie's mother, however, refused to be separated from her daughter, so the two were asked to leave together.

"There were police officers [in small rowboats] ... coming to get as many people as they could," she said. "Nobody around could swim. If you weren't bed-ridden, you had to get on a boat."

After waiting for hours, they finally crowded into one of the small craft — along with seven or eight other people, including a 6-month-old baby. But getting on the boat hardly provided any comfort or relief because "there were snipers who were shooting at the boat because of the fear of looting," she said.

In the end, they both made it to a shelter in Texas, where they stayed for a short time before returning to Louisiana. But they have never moved back to New Orleans.

The Calm: Getting through her surreal experience has taught Jaimie just how strong she is.

"Nothing can stop me," she told MTV News.

She's now written a book about her incredible journey, "Surviving the Storm," which she plans to self-publish next month.

3

John Michael Bradford, 19, an up-and-coming jazz trumpeter living in Metairie, Louisiana



"It was like a Saturday, and I was watching cartoons in my house," John Michael remembered. "My parents came in and turned off the cartoons and turned on the news. I didn't even know what was going on."

The Storm: John Michael was just 9 years old and lived in nearby Metairie. Soon, he was packed up and leaving town with seven other relatives and friends, headed for San Antonio, Texas, where they all remained for three months.

"It was hard during that time [in Texas] because they wanted me to go back to school, and I didn't want to go. I didn't want to be in school when I didn't know what was happening back home."

The Calm: "It changed by my life for the better," he told MTV News.

During their evacuation, the New Orleans musician Sam Williams, of Big Sam's Funky Nation, lived with John Michael's family and soon became the boy's mentor.

"It was good having Sam there because I look up to him and got to hear him practice his trombone," John Michael said. "He is the reason I play music today, and he inspired me to do what I'm doing now."

After hearing Sam play, John Michael quickly decided to devote his life to New Orleans music and to sharing that music with the world — just as the great Louis Armstrong did.

He begged his parents for a trombone like Sam's, and after a year of pleas, he was eventually given his grandfather's old high school trumpet instead.

Now at just 19, he's a graduate of the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and he has performed in Cuba, Japan and Switzerland as well as at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and even the actor David Arquette's wedding.

John Michael has also shared the stage with jazz heavyweights like Wynton Marsalis. He'll be moving to Boston soon to attend the prestigious Berklee College of Music on a full scholarship.

"Anyone dealing with a tragedy needs to look for something positive in it," he told us. "That will overcome any negative feelings you have about it."



"You didn't have a sense of panic because we had been through huge storms before," he said.

The Storm: Shawn, who was 10, was living with his family in Uptown New Orleans.

Their laid-back attitude led them to decide to ride out the storm across the street in the Flint Goodridge Apartments, a multiple-story retirement complex where his grandmother was a tenant. As water rose around the retirement complex, they watched their home next door be inundated.

"We could see water coming up through the manhole covers, and I turned to my mom, like, 'That doesn't look right.' After three hours or so, everything around us was just flooded," Shawn recalled.

The family was trapped in the retirement home for five days before a Coast Guard helicopter came to rescue them from the roof. Eventually, they found themselves in Dallas, where they lived for eight months.

When the Coast Guard arrived, rescuers said they would only be taking women and children, so Shawn's father was informed that he would have to wait for a second helicopter.

"Me and my dad were split up," Shawn told MTV News. The boy and his mother didn't get back in touch with him again for two months. The whole thing was a huge deal for a 10-year-old — as it would have been for anyone, of any age.

"I had a little bit of counseling at my school in Dallas for about two months," he said. "I needed a lot more. There were plenty of times especially right after the storm ... when I thought about suicide, even as a 10-year-old."

The Calm: "Before Katrina, I wasn't a very good student all. The school system in Dallas was better. ... They helped me more, and they just made me want to learn."

Without that change, he said, "I don't know if I would have ended up at Loyola."

After he graduates from college, Shawn dreams he'll become a scholar and activist focusing on eliminating police brutality, reforming the criminal justice system, and ending the war on drugs.

Reflecting now, Shawn said the lesson he's learned is to "enjoy what's yours while you can because you never know when something — whether human-caused or natural — is going to come and change it."



"I had just started the seventh grade two weeks before."

The Storm: Krista, who was 12, was living in Slidell, a short drive across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans. Since her parents were divorced, she was visiting with her father that weekend.

"My dad had a condo in Florida so we decided to drive out there," she said, but "there was no one on the side of the road we were on going to Florida. It was eerie ... to see this huge traffic jam on the other side."

A few weeks later, when she did return home, it was a ghost town.

"I'm pretty sure we were some of the first [people] back," she recollected. "Slidell felt so lonely. Very few of my friends had come back. We were in the middle of this post-apocalyptic scene."

"My mom and brother went to Texas, but I didn't know exactly what was going on or where they were. It was really nerve-racking."

Eventually, Krista's brother and his pregnant girlfriend needed to move in with Krista and her mom. Sharing the house was awkward, she said, and the stress was overwhelming, so she turned to food for comfort.

The Calm: "My weight is a constant reminder of Katrina," she told MTV News. "I have a job in a fitness center and I'm trying to get my life back together. [But] when I started thinking about why I gained weight, it came down to that. I wasn't eating healthy, and I was eating a lot to try to bury emotions."

"My brother and I got a bit closer after Katrina. Since he is 11 years older than me, we weren't very close when I was young. But since he and his girlfriend lived with my mom and [me], we got closer."

What she learned?

"Children are both more resilient and not as resilient as they seem. Things like this ... can haunt you for the rest of your life."



(Salvaged photo of Alycia swimming as a baby with her mom) "My house is completely underwater," Alycia remembered saying. "All my family's houses are completely underwater."

The Storm: Alycia, then 18, was a student living in the dorms at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where she was safe from the storm. But her family was living in Violet, Louisiana, in hard-hit St. Bernard Parish.

As she and her roommate were watching the news in the dorm lobby, she suddenly saw areas that she recognized. Though cell phones weren't getting through at the time, eventually she did receive a call from her mother, who had been planning on heading back home.

"I was the one who had to tell my mom that there was nothing left. You can't go home," Alycia told MTV News.

"The psychological impact was very hard, especially because a few weeks later, I needed to start class.

"My family stayed in the dorms for about two weeks. After they left, I did not see them again until Christmas," she said. "I did not have anyone around who truly knew what I was going through so it made it hard to talk about it."

Because of her isolation, Alycia sought help with one of LSU's school counselors.

"During my first visit, I just wanted someone who would listen," she said, "but instead she kept insisting I take an antidepressant medication. I have never been big on medication (not even Tylenol for a headache), so I walked out of there and never went back."

The Calm: "We are better off because of Katrina," she asserted.

For one, her mother had never owned a house before the storm. Now, both Alycia and her mother own houses in Carriere, Mississippi.

"We have been able to have some experiences and opportunities out here that we couldn't have had if Katrina had not happened."

On top of that, her religious faith has been strengthened.

"Bad things happen. We live in a world that's not perfect. The only thing we can control is our response to those things. Giving up is not an option."

