

LIVING



Kermit Ruffins takes the sound of New Orleans on the road.

Wednesday in Living



Oregon National Guard Cpl. Eamon Graham plays the Neil Young song 'Hey, hey, My, My' on his guitar while fellow Guardsman Randy Keiper rests on his cot in their bunk on the second floor of Frederick Douglass High School in New Orleans.

IT'S A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Story and photos by
Kathy Anderson
Staff photographer

For the thousands of National Guardsmen patrolling the desolate and decimated streets of New Orleans, home is wherever help is needed.

SOME TAKE REFUGE in tents, others sleep in air hangars, more reside in vacated public school classrooms. For many there is no running water and no shower. Some have postponed college graduations to be here because of missed classes. Others make the sacrifice of being far from children and spouses. But all of the 25,000 National Guardsmen that we talked to — representing all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands — gave the same response when asked why they've come to New Orleans at the lowest point in the city's history: "We are here to help."

"I was glad to have the opportunity to help rather than watching things on the news," said Cpl. Eamon Graham of the Oregon National Guard. Graham's current "home" is a second-floor classroom at the Frederick Douglass School in New Orleans, where his National Guard unit is based. Members of his unit cleaned the mess left by residents who turned

the building into a makeshift shelter, and repaired the damage done by vandals. Despite the lack of running water, "It's a great place to be living right now," Eamon said.

For Spe. Krysa Jackson of the Illinois Army National Guard, the mission was more personal: She has relatives in New Orleans. Her grandfather was in the hospital when the hurricane hit. "I was here for five days before I found out that he'd been airlifted to Texas," she said. "If it weren't for the guard troops doing the airlifting, he wouldn't have escaped."

Their day-to-day routines are anything but routine — one day they may be clearing trees with chainsaws, the next day patrolling flooded or wind-sheared city streets by boat or by truck, the next day knocking on doors in search of God-knows-what. The personal toll is high, but so, says Master Sgt. Roger McBride of the California National Guard, are the rewards.

"I do this for selfish reasons," he said. "It's the good feeling I get from helping people."

For more pictures, turn to page C-8



A pack of dogs bark at a pair of patrolling National Guardsmen at the corner of Bartholomew and North Galvez Streets.

Staff photographer Kathy Anderson can be reached at kathyanderson3@yahoo.com.

MICHAEL VICKNAIR, 28 MECHANIC & TOW TRUCK DRIVER

HOME: Toca, La., in St. Bernard Parish
HAVEN: Wolf Creek Baptist Camp shelter in Lake Village, Ark.

"Never in a million years did we think we would have a storm surge like this. When the storm got really bad, the wind was bending 70-foot trees like plastic spoons.

"We went to a neighbor's house. The windows there were flexing with the wind's force, and when the electricity went out, I started walking to my house to get a generator. On the way, I saw a wall of water about a foot high rushing toward me. I decided to go for my boat, not my generator. "By the time I got it off the trailer, the water had swollen to about 7 feet. "We pointed the boat toward Almonaster Blvd. We saw coffins floating out of tombs . . . one on a church doorstep. "At the Industrial Canal levee, I saw 18-

MY STORM STORY



Hurricane Katrina: In their own words

wheelers (parked in a truck lot). A Peterbilt is a water-tight machine. I'm not a thief. I'm a mechanic. But I've got my family. I decide the water is only 3 to 6 feet high. I say to my family, 'Get in, or you're staying here.'

"We head to Chef Menteur (Highway). It looked like someone had put someone's town in a blender and dumped it out.

"I'm not sure how many days had gone by. We proceeded West. We stopped to sleep and shower in a hotel. When we came back out to the Peterbilt, it had been stolen. We had \$500 in cash, and I bought a piece-of-junk Dodge van for \$300. We spent \$97 for gasoline. Three hours later, it blew up on the interstate. "A street-sweeper towed us in after we stopped at Wal-Mart for some rope. We spent our last \$100 on a cell phone. We called relatives from Lake Village



(Arkansas) to come get us. Even the strangers here (at Wolf Creek Baptist Camp) treated us like long-lost relatives.

"I'll be back home as soon as they open up the highways, and if they don't, I know where I left my boat.

"It's not about what happened. It's about putting it back."

— As told to Chris Bynum on Sept. 9

New Orleans means always having to say they're sorry

CHEVY CHASE, MD. — I am writing this from the house where I grew up. It's a thousand miles from New Orleans.

Could be a million, really.

I have come to visit my wife and children, who have settled here amongst my family and old friends in a place we know and trust.

My gang, they live what looks like a normal life here now. School. Shopping.

Play dates and birthday parties. Next week, my wife says she's going to start going to the gym.

A normal life. Without me. Life goes on, I guess. But it's

hard to bond the disconnect between what life was like before Aug. 29 and what it's like now.

Talk about loose ends.

Don't get me wrong: Chevy Chase is an amazing place. It was a homey, professional-class neighborhood when my parents moved here in 1963 and is now a profoundly wealthy suburb of Washington, D.C., where famous people live.

It took a hurricane to make it happen, but now my family lives in the same ZIP code as George Will.



CHRIS ROSE

See ROSE, C-8