



## The Jackson family finds hope, friends in Texas

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Johnny Jackson Jr. had never before laid eyes on Alan and Kathy Box when he found them waiting for him in the breakfast area of an Addison, Texas, motel one early September day in 2005.

Jackson, his 80-year-old mother, Josephine, and his mentally disabled brother, Kevin, had hardly recovered from their pre-dawn rescue from his mother's flooded Gentilly townhouse and their grueling trek out of the city a week earlier.

Now squeezed into an extended-stay motel in suburban Dallas, 12 Jacksons, New Orleans-born and bred, found themselves essentially homeless, unemployed and adrift among strangers. Worse, they feared their futures lay in the hands of the same public agencies that left them to their own devices after faulty federal levees nearly drowned them.

But that afternoon in Texas marked the beginning of a heart-to-heart transaction between the two families: the Boxes, who desperately wanted to help, and the Jacksons, who desperately needed it.

And before they ever made it to that Texas hotel, the Jacksons had already been borne by several strangers who aided their passage from a doom-struck city to the start of their new lives in exile.

Two years after Katrina, the Jacksons' tale mirrors that of countless New Orleans-area families who survived in unfamiliar places because of the generosity of open-handed strangers, unmediated by written applications, proof of income or insurance information.

In the face of loss, anxiety and the spirit-sapping struggle to rebuild, thousands of people have showered flood victims with extraordinary private generosity -- often direct, face-to-face giving, many times filling the considerable gaps in the often bungled, bureaucratic response of government.

Those private encounters continue today.

By the accounting of one government agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service, 1.1 million volunteers have come to work in New Orleans during the past two years, donating nearly \$263 million in free labor.

"They were the first ones in, and they'll be the last ones out," said Mary Sutton, FEMA's liaison with local volunteer groups.

Those statistics don't account for the anonymous kindnesses, small and large, like those between the Box and Jackson families.

Jackson, a 63-year-old former state representative and two-term City Councilman until 1994, has since settled with his wife, Jean, and two of his adult children and their families in a Dallas suburb. Today his family maintains a close connection with the people who first showed up in that Texas motel, far from the Gentilly neighborhood where the Jacksons' story began.

### A watery escape

Just before dawn on the second morning after Hurricane Katrina struck, a flashlight beam pierced the open second-story window of the flooded, darkened townhouse in the 2900 block of Press Court, where Jackson and his mother, brother and nephew slept.

Below the window, one of three men in a flat-bottomed aluminum skiff swept a flashlight over the house.

Someone called out, "Anybody up there?"

Jackson recognized one man in the boat as someone from the neighborhood. The other two were strangers, but evidently civilians. They wore similar golf shirts with an emblem on the breast. In the dark, Jackson made out "Redfish Club" on their shirts.

The men tossed up life jackets. Jackson buckled his mother into one. He led her downstairs to the flooded first floor, took her on his back and ducked underwater through the submerged doorway to safety outside.

The rescuers motored the Jacksons a mile to a transfer point, where eventually they were shuttled to the elevated portion of Interstate 10 near Louisa Street.

By dawn, they made it to the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, part of a growing multitude of the soaked and miserable forced out of their flooded homes to a sliver of high ground.

All Wednesday and Thursday the Jacksons waited, with no food and little water, as the crowd thickened from hundreds to an estimated 15,000 or more. Rumors periodically swept the crowd that trucks or buses were on the way. The elderly began to weaken; at least four would die in the withering heat, three for apparent lack of medical aid, one of an apparent heart attack.

Got to do something

Jackson became convinced that his mother would not last much longer.

A diabetic with high blood pressure, Josephine Jackson endured the heat and dehydration, but was growing weak. Kevin Jackson, Jackson's mentally disabled brother, suffered from a chronic condition that grossly swelled his legs.

On Friday morning, Jackson told his family they had to cross the Crescent City Connection to the West Bank. If they could hitchhike out of town to the west, he reasoned, family members in Texas could rescue them.

Stopping every block to rest, the party needed two hours to walk 10 blocks to a bridge ramp at Baronne Street. There, pedestrians streaming past bore the news that Gretna police atop the bridge were turning people back.

And then another godsend: A man driving a bottled water truck -- probably stolen, Jackson surmised -- stopped at the base of the ramp, took them on and carried them through the police roadblock.

The driver dropped them at the foot of the bridge, where another stranger in another truck, a pickup with its bed filled with children, stopped and invited the Jacksons to squeeze aboard.

That driver headed down the West Bank Expressway as far as Westwego, where he dropped them at an empty filling station.

The party rested there, exhausted, until soon a Westwego police car approached.

A voice blared over a loudspeaker:

"Keep moving. You can't stop here. Start moving," Jackson recalled.

The officer got out of his car and walked toward them, clearly meaning business.

Jackson thought, "Man, this can't end well."

But at that moment, Jackson said, another officer drove up and intervened. Jackson would later learn he was Joe Fennidy, the son of one of Jackson's comrades in the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club.

As the first officer backed off, they were joined by Westwego Police Chief Dwayne Munch. Fennidy told the Jacksons they were within a short walk of a police-run emergency shelter at Stella Worley Junior High School. Munch ferried Jackson's mother and brother in his police car. The rest of the family walked.

At that moment, the shelter was filled with a couple hundred evacuees -- and cots, water and food.

'How can we help?'

As the Jackson family struggled to find safe passage out of town, Alan and Kathy Box knew nothing of their ordeal. But like millions of other Americans, they watched the television images out of New Orleans in horror.

Alan, 55, and Kathy, 45, knew the city. Through most of the 1990s, he had been president and CEO of EZ Communications, which owned several radio stations around the country, including B-97 FM in New Orleans.

Spurred to do something -- anything -- Alan Box called an old business associate on the north shore and asked if he needed help.

The associate said no, but he told Box he worried about one of his own employees, Kenyatta Jackson, Johnny Jackson's daughter. The woman's extended family had been wiped out and scattered, the man told Box, and they were attempting to regroup around Kenyatta's in-laws in the Dallas area, more or less under Box's nose.

So it was then that the Jacksons and the Boxes found themselves meeting at the motel in Addison.

The two families worked through some initial awkwardness. Just looking at Jackson, Alan Box could tell he was a successful man, suddenly thrust into a tough spot. The Box family sought simply to assist, without offending anyone's pride.

"We don't know what to offer, but how can we help?" Alan Box recalled asking the family.

The Boxes learned of the Jacksons' trek out of the city. They learned that the family had been bused from Westwego to Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport, where a FEMA evacuation flight took them to San Antonio. Once there, the family had boarded a midnight bus to Dallas, and hours later stepped down into the arms of waiting family members.

### Forging a friendship

After several days in a local hospital, Josephine, Kevin and Johnny Jackson were with the rest of the family, but at loose ends.

The Boxes asked the Jacksons to join them for dinner at their home, where they could agree on a plan. But first, Alan Box left Jackson with the keys to his new GMC Yukon, the one with a navigation system to guide them around an unfamiliar city. And in short order, Jackson said, the Boxes put themselves and their considerable personal resources at the family's disposal, helping with housing, clothes, money and connections.

After that first conversation at the motel and the resulting dinner, the Boxes offered to let the Jacksons move in with them in their spacious house.

Jackson's daughter, Jeanne, took them up on the offer, while the rest of the family, though cramped in the hotel, opted for staying together in mutual support rather than splitting up for maximum comfort.

Meanwhile, Kathy Box arranged a shopping trip to supply the women with replacement clothes and persuaded the department store manager to extend the evacuees a discount.

Alan Box provided Jackson and his son-in-law, Torye Morris, some start-up cash. He urged them to view it as just something to get them started, and encouraged them to pay the same favor to someone else down the road.

"Johnny got a little teary," Alan Box recalled.

A bond between the families began to form.

They would do the same

During their first few weeks in Dallas, the Jacksons knew no one outside the Box family and Kenyatta Jackson's in-laws, Jackson said. The Boxes ached to help. They pictured themselves in the same situation.

Moreover, they thought, here was a chance to do more than fire off a check to a distant institution. The Jacksons were in need before their very eyes, Alan Box said. They could help and see the results of that help. They could see what was necessary, and what wasn't.

Yet soon enough they tried to calibrate their assistance so as not to offend the Jacksons' pride.

Neither side wanted the families to be cast in a donor-suppliant relationship.

Early on, "Jean cried a lot. We offered things, and she was embarrassed about it," Kathy Box said. "It was hard for them to accept. And I'd have been the same way."

The Jacksons talked among themselves, telling one another they couldn't become overly dependent on the Boxes' generosity, and certainly couldn't abuse it. They appreciated the Box family's sensitivity to their awkward position.

"Sometimes people do good for you, and it can be a condescending kind of good," Jackson said. "But these people were never like that -- never overbearing. Always respectful."

Early on, the Boxes tapped their friends in search of help for the Jacksons.

Alan Box persuaded an acquaintance, Chris Fair, to pull the "For Sale" sign from a small vacant house in nearby Richardson so the Jacksons could move there until the end of the year.

The house was small, and it was a squeeze for the extended family, but the offer to the Jacksons was rent-free. The Jacksons appreciated the generosity, but insisted on some payment.

"We decided, come hell or high water, we're going to pay something," Jackson said.

Kathy Box's brother provided new dentures for Jackson's elderly mother. She also helped her secure new glasses, as well as custom replacement shoes for Kevin Jackson's malformed feet.

Through Charlie Fisher, a neighbor of the Boxes, Jackson's wife, Jean, found a job with a temporary employment agency doing contract work at FedEx Kinko's, where Fisher worked as a human relations executive.

On Christmas day, Jean Jackson drove her husband out to see the new house they would buy with an SBA loan in McKinney, another Dallas suburb. She had picked it out with the help of Cathy Fisher, Charlie's wife, a real estate agent, who worked tirelessly to find them the right place.

At the closing, Cathy Fisher signed over her commission to the Jacksons.

"Consider it my contribution to the future," Jackson recalled her saying.

Bonds still strong

Today, the Jacksons' future seems to be in McKinney, where they have decided to settle.

Jean Jackson has left the temporary agency and transferred directly to the FedEx Kinko payroll.

Kenyatta, her husband, Torye, and their son live with Johnny and Jean Jackson in McKinney. Josephine and Kevin Jackson live in Slidell.

Jackson still serves on the boards of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation and Total Community Action, an anti-poverty agency. He tries to spend at least one week each month in New Orleans and hopes ultimately to renovate his own ruined house on Louisa Street.

But among the Jacksons' roster of permanent friends now are the Boxes and Fishers, who grew from benefactors into friends.

"That first Thanksgiving, we all got together, then got together again that Christmas," Alan Box said. "We exchanged gifts. Last year the Jacksons invited us to their anniversary party."

Last year, too, Jackson, a float captain in the Krewe of Zulu, invited both families to ride aboard his float.

At the last moment, the Fishers had to beg off because of an illness in Charlie Fisher's family, but Alan and Kathy Box rode.

"We thought we knew a little about how Mardi Gras worked," Alan Box said. "Truth is, we knew very little."

Suited up in blackface and fright wigs, the Boxes boarded their float and rolled through the streets of Central City. They watched the funky New Orleans neighborhoods roll by, the parade of bars, barbershops, little groceries and shotgun houses that made up Jackson's New Orleans world.

They turned off Jackson Avenue and swung into an immense sea of people on St. Charles Avenue, with bands playing and thousands of hands upstretched for Zulu throws.

For that morning, the Boxes were temporary New Orleanians -- a gift of Johnny Jackson.

"Never had so much fun in my life," Alan Box said. "We threw till our arms were sore."

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