

With Grace and Humor, Louisiana Family Builds a New Life in Covington

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Submitted photo

*"It don't take no nerve to do somethin'
when there ain't nothin' else you can do."*
--John Steinbeck, "The Grapes of Wrath"

STORM RAVAGED: The Naquins' neighborhood in Dulac, La., is pictured after last year's hurricanes. The Naquin home is pictured in the background.

COVINGTON - When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in late August, Simon and Crystal Naquin and their three children lived in the town of Dulac, La., about an hour's drive southwest of New Orleans.

The storm left the Naquins down but not out. They were rebuilding the damage left by Katrina when Hurricane Rita came knocking four weeks later.

The family was unscathed, but their house was ravaged beyond repair.

"It was like Katrina closed the left door, and then Rita came in and closed the right door on us," Simon Naquin (pronounced nah-KEHN) remembers. "After I came back from looking at the damage [to our house], I told [Crystal] 'You'll feel a lot better about this if you just realize one thing right now. It's all gone.'"

For two weeks after Rita demolished their home, the Naquins stayed in a local high school. Like the Joad family in Steinbeck's classic novel about a family uprooted by natural disaster, the family had no choice but to relocate and start over.

Northern Kentucky was already home to Crystal's uncle and cousins, and it seemed a perfect fit for the family's new life. Catholic Social Services offered to help the family relocate.

So on Oct. 15, the day before middle son Logan's 10th birthday, the Naquins climbed into the family car ("the boat," they call it), and they headed for Kentucky.

Walking into the Naquins' small apartment in the City Heights housing project in Covington, you wouldn't think the family had traveled far from their home in Louisiana. Greeted with smells of shrimp and sausage gumbo, you might suppose you had wandered into a bistro on the bayou.

Whether she's loading you up with leftovers or homemade pecan candies, Crystal Naquin, 32, makes sure you leave with a full stomach and a strong sense of Louisiana hospitality.

The Joads, one of thousands of farm families that fled the drought-stricken Great Plains in the 1930s, faced violence and the threat of starvation in California work camps. At least on the physical level, the challenges the Naquins face are less dire.

Quiet Courtesy, And an Air of Resolve

But in more ways than one, Covington is a long way from the largely French-speaking Louisiana Delta. In the 2000 census, two-fifths of Dulac's 2,458 residents were Native American. Nearly that many spoke a language other than English at home, and almost one-third of the people lived in poverty.

Crystal Naquin seems equally undaunted by the devastation that struck her old home and the difficulties of adjusting to her new one.

"I don't really get upset about it," she says with a soft composure in her voice. "It's just nature. No one can really help what happened. So it doesn't bother me that much."

Where one might expect to see dispirited casualties stands a well-adjusted family seemingly untouched by the whirlwind of changes it has experienced over the last several months.

The Naquin children are acclimated to their new surroundings and their new school, Covington's Ninth District Elementary, where they may be helping classmates develop a keener sense of the outside world. Simone, a fourth-grader at the school, "brings a different perspective, because most of these kids have



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BLENDING IN: Hurricane evacuees Simone Naquin, left, and her brothers Logan and Brett are making new friends at Covington's Ninth Street Elementary School.

never been out of Covington," said Colleen Curtis, Simone's language arts teacher.

Crystal, known in her hometown by her middle name, "Michelle," is a woman of medium height with wavy brown hair that hints at her Native American ancestry. She will call you "ma'am" until you ask her not to. Her air of resolve seems shaken only when she speaks of her mother and sister back in Louisiana.

"I cried on Christmas Eve and Christmas," she said. "I don't really miss Louisiana. I miss my family. This was my first Christmas away from them."

Simon, 34, will entertain a visitor for hours with stories that range from working on a shrimp boat (even through many of the hurricanes) to childhood memories of his aunt's haunted house near New Orleans. He starts out nearly every story with, "You know what the funny thing was..."-even the stories of his painful surgeries to alleviate his colon and liver cancers, both of which are in remission.

Because of his illnesses, Simon receives Social Security disability payments, which account for most of the family's income. Crystal is looking for work.

Money is tight, certainly, but the Naquins say their housing costs are less than they were in Dulac, and that has helped the family's finances.

The children share their parents' impeccable manners. Logan, age 10, runs down the stairs and into the kitchen, only to screech to a halt as if he forgot something. He hops back into the living room to offer a guest a drink of water.

Simone, the oldest at 11, quietly charms you with her sweet smile and plentiful goodbye hugs. And little Brett, 8, will do almost anything to make you laugh, even insisting on wearing his lime-green sunglasses for a newspaper photo shoot. (Mother Naquin vetoed that.)

Snow Angels-and No Hurricanes

It's true the Naquins have a lot to miss about their former home. The only body of water for miles is the Ohio River, and the only "beach" is a manmade water park. But there are some things, the Naquins have found, that Louisiana didn't have to offer.

"It's just beautiful here," Crystal said of Northern Kentucky's rolling landscape. "It's better than...the swamps and the mosquitoes!"

When the family first arrived, she said, the leaves were changing. "I took about a million pictures of it!"

Crystal had another photo-op when the kids experienced their first snow the day

before Thanksgiving. The family members talk over each other with excitement remembering that day.

"The kids woke me up, like 'It's snowing, it's snowing!'" Simon says.

Simone interjects, "We made snow angels!"

Crystal grabs her picture stash, "I took pictures!"

She flips through picture after picture of snow covering the small yard and sparsely planted trees outside their apartment door. She even has several pictures looking up into the sky as the white anomaly was falling.

For the Naquins, the most noteworthy facet of their new life in Kentucky is freedom from the constant threat of hurricanes.

"You know what the hardest thing is?" Simon says. "To sit there and rebuild something and know that another hurricane is just gonna come in."

As if channeling Tom Joad, who in Steinbeck's novel leads his family's Oklahoma-to-California odyssey, Simon adds: "At the end, I just said 'I've been here 13 years. That's long enough. It's time to try something new.'"

Crystal jokes, "I'm just worried about the tornadoes!"

So high atop the hills of Covington, the Naquins are trying something new and immersing themselves in their new hometown. Crystal and Simon celebrated Crystal's birthday Dec. 10 at nearby Jillian's. Adorned in her red lipstick and matching shirt, Crystal looked ready to live it up on Bourbon Street.

"It was great," she said. "All the lights... the games. It was a lot of fun. I was just happy we could find a babysitter!"

The family also plans on shopping at the Kenton County and Boone County animal shelters for a puppy to replace the dog they had to leave behind in their rushed move.

"I just wanted to do somethin' for the kids," Crystal said.

"I Feel More Sorry for Them"

Crystal spent time around the Christmas holiday watching television specials on the one-year anniversary of the tsunami that wreaked havoc on Southeast Asia. There were specials remembering the Gulf Coast hurricanes as well, but Crystal said she didn't have much interest in those.

"I just heard so much about Katrina, I don't want to hear about it no more," she laughs. "Watching about the tsunami, [I knew] that they lost a lot more people than we did. We got a chance. We got warnings. They didn't have nothin'. I feel more sorry for them than I do for us."

Losing your home, leaving the only life you knew - these are things that can crush a person's spirit and strength. But, as Simon would say, "you know what the funny thing is?" The Naquins have grown stronger in their struggles. They remember their former life in Louisiana with fondness and nostalgia but spend most of their energy on making Northern Kentucky their new, permanent home.

"We like it here," Crystal says. "We like the atmosphere. They got friendly people; it's nice. We plan on staying."

She only asks one thing.

Keep the tornadoes away from her.

By Crystal Naquin