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Katrina survivors adjust to life in Garrett

By Sarah A. Meisch
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Sarah Meisch/The Journal Gazette

Alyssa St. Amant, 14, left, with her parents, William and Denise St. Amant, give a presentation Saturday at Garrett Public Library.

GARRETT – Just six months ago, the St. Amant family lived in Meraux, La., not far from New Orleans. William St. Amant worked for Domino Sugar Co. Denise St. Amant taught school. Their daughters, Alyssa, 14, and Leah, 11, attended local schools. Denise's mother lived across the street from the family. It was a comfortable life.

Then Hurricane Katrina struck, scattering the family and changing their lives forever.

"The day before the hurricane, myself and my two daughters decided to evacuate," Denise St. Amant said during a Theater for Ideas presentation Saturday afternoon at the Garrett Public Library. "We had never evacuated before; ... we weren't really thinking this is it. We thought we'd be gone three or four days."

William "Billy" St. Amant stayed behind to watch the houses as his family traveled to Birmingham, Ala., for the first night and then to Knoxville, Tenn., where they stayed with family.

"We just didn't realize the magnitude of what happened until we reached Knoxville," Denise St. Amant said.

After a week in Knoxville in a house crowded with displaced people, she decided to take the girls to Garrett, where a lifelong friend had offered them a place to stay.

But no one knew what had happened to Billy St. Amant.

"We posted him on missing-person Web sites," St. Amant said. "We stopped at all the police stations along the way. There was nothing we could do. They wouldn't let you back."

Billy St. Amant, after riding out the first few hours of the hurricane in a boat in his backyard, made his way back to the house and into the attic, nursing a bad cut to one of his legs he had gotten from a boat trailer. After he closed the door to the attic, furniture floating below shifted, wedging the attic door shut.

"I thought it was going to be over in that attic," he said. "The heat, I had insulation all over me. I didn't have my blood pressure medication. I had to fend for myself."

The furniture eventually shifted again, allowing him to open the attic door after three days. He found his neighborhood deserted and had no way to contact his family until a couple of days later, when a crew from the TV show "Good Morning, America" found him.

He quickly rejoined the family in Garrett.

"I really saw some pretty rough things, things that will stick with me for the rest of my life," he said.

Life in Indiana, on the other hand, has been wonderful, he said.

Garrett resident Phil Heitz, who helps manage the affairs of his nephew, NBA basketball player Brad Miller, found a house he thought the St. Amants would like and rented it for them.

"He thinks of everything before we even thought of it," Denise St. Amant said. "He doesn't make you feel like it was a handout."

And the community has shown its generosity and caring spirit, she said.

"Every day, for weeks, good things would happen," she said. "People just coming over and leaving baskets of food on the porch ... for like two weeks, we ate off of gift certificates."

"We just can't thank enough people," Billy St. Amant added.

Heitz also has helped other members of the St. Amant family, including Denise St. Amant's sister, Dawn Ducote, who lives in an apartment in Garrett, and her mother, Corine Massicot, who's visiting from her temporary home in Virginia.

Although Massicot plans to return to New Orleans and reunite with her husband, the St. Amants are happy with their new home.

Denise St. Amant starts a new job Monday with the Garrett-Keyser-Butler Community School District's Headstart program, and Billy St. Amant works for Heidtman Steel in Butler.

"It's something I've never done before," he said. "I'm going through the training process."

He was a welder for 25 years, he said.

The girls have settled into their new schools, although Leah said she doesn't want any friends.

Alyssa said she's made some "really good, awesome friends" and that school feels like home.

The young teenager appreciates what the community has done for her and her family.

"If I could just give everybody like a million dollars to show my appreciation," she said, "that's what I'd do."

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