



No portion of this article may be reproduced without
express written permission of Style Publishing Group, LLC.
©2007 • All rights reserved.



Style Publishing Group
P.O. Box 1676
Frisco, Texas 75034
Phone: 972.335.1181
Toll Free: 877.781.7067
Fax: 214.722.2313

E-mail: info@friscostyle.com
Web: www.friscostyle.com

Ad Sales: (972) 335-1306



Children of Freddie Johnson's extended family. Front row left to right: Dalis Hatcher, LaShawn Williams, Anya Rodney, Nyla Rodney, Jalin Hatcher; Back row left to right: Lonnie Hammond, Mia Hatcher, Jordan Hammond
 photos by Chris Johnson

New School, New Life

By Wendy Crooks

ON AUGUST 29TH when Hurricane Katrina came and devastated the Gulf Coast, many were displaced to other cities and states. While some stayed relatively close by, only traveling as far as Baton Rouge, others ended up in places much further away. Many ended up right here in our community.

According to Shana McKay-Wortham, director of communications for the Frisco Independent School District (FISD), Frisco received 212 children into FISD as a result of Hurricane Katrina. For many areas, that increased number of students would have a huge impact. For FISD, however, they were ready. "Since FISD is such a rapidly growing school district anyway, we do have the ability to handle the new students' immediate needs," said McKay-Wortham. The FISD is just now beginning the process of providing information to the Texas Education Agency in order to receive funds from FEMA for assisting with educational costs. Many area businesses

made donations that helped to make the transition even smoother. Keller Williams Realty, Walgreens and Region X Educational Services all donated school supplies. Target made donations through a grant. Frisco Family Services (FFS) also provided food, clothing and housing.

Many within the FISD did their part to help. Students and staff in individual schools held a spare change drive and the monies collected were split between the Red Cross and Frisco Family Services. The schools generally have a food drive for FFS to stock their food bank around the holidays so they rescheduled the drives for September to accommodate the immediate needs of the evacuee families.

The administration of the FISD was clearly ready to help the effected students and their families deal with their new surroundings and become a part of our community. With a program called "Hope Rising," counselors were poised and ready to help make the students' tragic losses seem less.

"The schools generally have a food drive for FFS to stock their food bank around the holidays so they rescheduled the drives for September."

Hope Rising was originally established to help students who have experienced trauma in their lives such as losing a parent to an unexpected illness or even a friend to an automobile accident. This is the first time the counselors have utilized the program in a group setting. The training they received was second-to-none and the result has been a smooth transition for these heart-broken students and their families.

According to Patti Kubanet, a trauma and grief specialist for FISD, the Hope Rising program brought families in for a dinner and counselors helped to describe what the kids were going through and what the parents and students could expect in the future. The program initiated a Thursday evening parent support group to help the parents deal with their losses. The program also works with teens to help them with their coping skills and give them an understanding of what their parents are going through. The program for younger children helps provide a sense of security and prepares them with tools they will need to cope in life.

According to Kubanet the students response has been the same across the board. They are thrilled with the welcome they have received here by both staff and students. With FISD being such a rapidly growing school district, these children are not alone in being new or relatively new to the area. Kubanet has heard time and time again from these new students that the teachers and coaches are just so kind and caring.

There's still a certain amount of numbness the students feel due to the changes in their lives and the district both realizes it and plans to address it as the transition continues. Teachers, nurses and counselors are all aware of the potential of these students to slip academically and socially and know the signs of any regression. As the numbness wears off, the program will continue to offer regular support groups to help the kids get through the holidays and later the anniversary of the hurricane next August. "We just want these children to feel safe and secure," said Kubanet.

Kubanet gives credit for the success of the new students to everyone from the top down. She stated, "Dr. Reedy, our superintendent, has a great vision for putting all of the right people in place and FISD in its entirety has pulled together. Although FISD has seven counselors that are certified through the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in children, they are not alone in these efforts. The counselors, principals assistant principals, nurses and teachers have just made these kids feel comfortable."

One new Frisco family can testify to the love and warmth that Frisco has shown them since they've arrived.



Hurricane Katrina view from a satellite

photo provided by www.thereglobal.com

Freddie Johnson and about 40 of his family members came from the New Orleans and Slidell area to Frisco to avoid the storm.

"With FISD being such a rapidly growing school district, these children are not alone in being new or relatively new to the area."

Johnson said the state of Texas has been great. "Frisco has been breathtaking and unbelievable! We were embraced and we were shocked and overwhelmed at the treatment we received. We certainly appreciate it," said Johnson. He said although it was a little crazy in the beginning with 12 people in a one-bedroom apartment, his family is doing well and many of them plan to stay and make this their home.

Some of Johnson's family members have taken the losses hard, as the homes they left in New Orleans were their first. He said sadly, "They do realize, though, that there is little to go back to." While most of his family is looking for employment, many are struggling with the fact that they are without

transportation. He explained that many of them rode together as they fled New Orleans so they left vehicles behind and cannot retrieve them.

Although he quickly said they all like Frisco, Johnson still seemed sad and nostalgic as he recalled what their lives used to be like in New Orleans. "We love New Orleans. We all went to the same church. We had a fellowship there. It was a great church family and a great pastor. We all really miss that close-knit situation. It's hard to be away from all that." Since the city of New Orleans is still unclear as to what they plan to do, the plans of the Johnson family remain vague. "Some are definitely not going back to New Orleans. Some have the dream to go back but don't see it happening and some are fearful to go back," Johnson said.

Moving forward, Johnson said the people at Grace Avenue United Methodist Church on Main Street were great. "Pastor Billy was wonderful. They made us feel so welcomed. I remember a lady there named Lori who carried sofas and chairs up stairs to help us all out. They all did so much," he recalls.

Clearly so many people were affected by the wrath of Hurricane Katrina, but the fine residents and schools of Frisco most assuredly rose to the occasion and welcomed them with open loving arms.

Wendy Crooks is a freelance writer living in Plano.