Katrina’s devastation hits home

By Rebecca Basham

I remember when Caller ID and cell phones weren’t everyday necessities. I also remember getting by just fine without them. I remember actually writing letters and waiting forever for replies. Sometimes I was nostalgic and think that we’re all a little oppressed by the wealth of contact and information available to us in a second or two. It used to be easy to disappear for an hour or even a day, but quietly disappearing is not possible anymore — or at least that’s what I thought until three weeks ago.

I talked to my mom and my sister, Ginny, the day before Katrina hit. They were fine, my mom believed, 40 miles north of New Orleans. She’d just bought a new house outside of the city. I had tried to get her to buy in Orleans parish, but she told everyone she was ready for the suburbs and headed for the North shore. Just this once I’ll concede that my mom did well not taking my advice into consideration. “You know it probably won’t hit New Orleans anyway,” my mom always doubts dire predictions. “How many times have we packed up and evacuated?” I was nodding over the phone and thinking, too many to count. So my mom and my wheelchair-bound younger sister held up in Mom’s new house with lots of junk food, rented movies and a couple of gallons of water. Mom told me she didn’t want to tape the windows since it would be too messy and probably wasn’t needed. When she ended the conversation with “Don’t worry so much,” I hung up thinking that I was catastrophizing. They’ll be OK, I thought and flipped the channel to something more interesting than the pre-storm commentary on CNN.

The next morning, Katrina was rumbling off the shores of the Gulf Coast; hours later, there was no Gulf Coast. I was trying to prepare a lecture on the mythology of the great flood for a class in Composition, but the uncanny similarities were too creepy to note. I tried calling my mom. All circuits are busy; please try your call later. It was an annoying message to listen to, but I listened cruelly so it for the next three days. I imagined functional hysteria. I had it. I was glued to a television set watching my hometown drown. For every person crying, I was crying. While people were screaming at the cameras for help, I was sitting in New Jersey wondering if something in the water made me hallucinate. How could this destruction be happening? I saw the stop where I used to wait for the streetcar to take me to the Quarter submerged inch by inch. I saw the Whole Foods Market where I used to shop with its doors thrown open and people scurrying around with the inventory. I saw my old street washing away.

The media were covering the Superdome and the Convention Center, but there are so many other places where people were fighting for their lives, like the Levee in St. Bernard and at the Lake Front. So much was wanted. Every few minutes I would pick up the phone and call Mom or my friend Robbie or Mary Anne or Yolanda or Kate or Tony or David. All circuits are busy; please try your call later. All circuits are busy; please try your call later. It was maddening. What was going on? Did they evacuate? Why didn’t I call every person I know before the storm? Why didn’t I know exactly where each of these people was? All circuits are busy, please try your call later. By the hundredth time I heard that anticlimactic message, I threw the phone on the floor and danced on it. I’ll never work again. But, it was OK because I have a cell phone. I rooted through my purse and hit the automatic dial for home. All circuits are busy; please try your call later. Was there a home left to be back to? The TV. People live on rooms, in hot public buildings that were anything but safe. No National Guard showing up. No FEMA. No help. Just screaming and crying. I was so angry, so helpless, so paralyzed with horror. And I was 1,200 miles away from the devastation, but I could imagine the unmericiful Louisianah heart; I could imagine the desperation of being ignored. I could taste the anger swirling around every corner. All circuits are busy; please try your call later. What was I going to do? Where were Mom and Ginny? Where were my friends? Did anybody know? All circuits are busy, please try your call later.

Three days after the storm, I got a call from my grandmother in Kentucky. “Your mom just called me, honey. She and Ginny are almost to Laura’s house in Austin.” I have never felt so