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A LIFE TRANSFORMED IN REMEMBRANCE

It was August 29, 2005, and David was home from school because schools had closed. Weather reports stated that a hurricane was headed straight for New Orleans, Louisiana. David's family was trying to decide whether they should wait out the storm or head out of the city. At the last minute, only three hours before Hurricane Katrina made land, the family decided to head to Jackson, Mississippi to stay with a family friend. David, along with his grandmother, two sisters, mother, and several other relatives loaded up in the family van. In addition to the human family, six hamsters, one dog, and two birds joined the family on their trip to Mississippi.

When they arrived in Mississippi, Hurricane Katrina also hit there, with a tree falling onto the roof of the home they were staying in while they were inside. At this point, they were forced to leave this home. They had to turn their animals into the shelter in Mississippi and go stay in the Coliseum in Mississippi. They remained there for a few days, and they were given a voucher to go to a hotel room where they all stayed for two weeks. Once it was safe to return, the family traveled back to New Orleans to survey the damage. They found that David's grandmother's home where he had been living was looted and damaged beyond repair. His mother's apartment was completely destroyed. The family had no place to go as most of their family resided in New Orleans. It was quickly determined that David's mother would need to leave the area with her three children, including David who had been residing with his grandmother since birth. The only place they had to go was to Montgomery County, MD where there was an uncle they could stay with until they were on their feet again. So, the family drove to Silver Spring, MD, leaving behind their family, friends and support system, traveling with the little belongings they had been able to get out of with prior to the storm. David's grandmother went to Birmingham, Alabama to stay with her daughter until she could reunite with the family. His grandmother had chronic health problems and a heart condition that had worsened with the stress of a natural disaster.

One year later, David's grandmother came to Maryland to John Hopkins University to have a heart transplant. The family was looking forward to having her join them, and create a new life in Maryland. Unfortunately, on September 12, 2006, David's grandmother passed away before she could receive this life saving procedure. David was overcome with grief, losing the woman who had cared for him since he was two-years-old. At fourteen, David didn't know how to handle the pain and sorrow. He was in a new community without the extended family support he was accustomed. The food tasted the different. The people talked different. The music was different. His foundation was gone. As a result, David made decisions that resulted in the need for placement out of his home with his mother.

David was placed in various placements before coming to Greentree Adolescent Program (GAP), part of the National Center for Children and Families in August 2010. Before coming to GAP, David struggled to invest in his own life. He had dropped out of high school. He had never had a job before. He kept his feelings of his grief over losing his grandmother and his home in Hurricane Katrina. However, when he was placed at GAP, something clicked for David, and he began to talk about his feelings about losing his grandmother and losing

his New Orleans roots. He shared memories of his grandmother that were filled with love, pain, and loss. He talked about missing the music that was special and unique to New Orleans. He talked about the food and family gatherings that his family had before Hurricane Katrina. He talked about moving from New Orleans to a foreign land that didn't have the spirit of New Orleans. As he talked, he healed.

As he healed, he became curious about his biological father who he had never known. He began to ask questions of his mother. He hadn't even known his full name. In March 2010, David decided he wanted to find his father. He knew it would be a difficult process as people had been displaced from their homes due to Hurricane Katrina, and David's mother hadn't seen his father since David's birth.

David and his therapist decided to begin their search with the understanding that it may not lead to locating his father. David's therapist paid an internet search engine to research David's father's name and last known contact information, which yielded over 15 addresses for David's father and two sisters.

Within one week, this writer received a call from Lisa, David's father's sister. She reported that her mother had received three letters for each of her children at her home. She immediately called Lisa who traveled to open the letter. The family had been affected by Hurricane Katrina as well; however, David's paternal grandparents had returned to their home where they had resided since David's father was a child. The family had searched for David when he was an infant, but relationship issues and misinformation about David had hindered their search. Then, Hurricane Katrina happened, and they gave up, assuming that David had been displaced.

One day later, David was able to talk to his aunt and his grandmother. By the end of the day, David was able to reconnect with his father and stepmother. David's father married but did not have any other children. He had always longed to find his son and develop a relationship with him. After grieving for so many years for his grandmother, his home, and his community, David had reason to celebrate. He had finally figured out who he was and where he came from.

In March 2011, David passed his GED exam and began attending Montgomery College as a full time student. He obtained a job at Giant Food in August 2011, and he continues to maintain his employment. In May 2011, David advanced from GAP to FutureBound Independent Living Program of the National Center for Children and Families. In this program, he is gaining additional life skills, saving his money, and completing school. David will make a trip back to New Orleans in June 2011 with the help of NCCF to meet his father for the first time. He is eager to meet his father, stepmother and a host of other extended relatives. David also hopes to see his maternal relatives who have been separated by distance as a result of Hurricane Katrina. David looks forward to returning to his community, its unique culture, and becoming acquainted with a father he never knew.

David began the program as a young man filled with grief, deeply affected by the death of his grandmother and the displacement from his city. He is now part of the NCCF family, and he continues to move forward in his life towards independence, success, and family support. When asked about his grandmother's thoughts about the progress he has been made, he humbly says in a New Orleans accent that remains strong, "She would be proud."

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