



Attorneys Patti and Jay Golden's Biloxi home prior to Hurricane Katrina.

What remains of the Golden home after Katrina.





Legacy of Hurricane Katrina Takes Toll on Mississippi Attorneys

It had been 36 years and 10 days and some Mississippians had actually forgotten the extent of the destruction Camille had caused, while others remembered it vividly. No one, however, will likely forget the effects of Hurricane Katrina.

Mississippi's legal community was certainly not immune to the aftermath of Katrina. With close to 900 of its more than 6,600 active attorneys practicing and living on the coast, it had a major impact on not only those attorneys but also the many Gulf Coast residents who relied on their services. Now in the wake of Katrina the legal needs would be even greater. The question arose as to whether the legal community would be equipped to handle them.

"The reality is that the legacy of Katrina is taking a huge human toll on lawyers whose clients are truly in desperate need of help, while lawyers struggle to deal with the identical problems, along with their neighbors and family," said Biloxi attorney Patti Golden. Golden's office suffered severe wind and rain damage.

Golden's home was reduced to rubble. She and her husband Jay, also an attorney, raised their family in a 70-year old brick house on the beach. After Katrina nothing was left of the house itself and they found few personal belongings in the rubble. Their daughter's wedding was scheduled for the next week and the reception was to be held at their house. However, the storm not only destroyed the house but also the church, the caterer's business, the wedding dress and bridesmaid's dresses, and all of the gifts.

Golden understands that she did not suffer alone. Most coast lawyers suffered in some way, and continue to suffer a loss of income.

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By Gail Gettis

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Gulfport attorney William M. Rainey's home at 924 East Beach in Gulfport before Hurricane Katrina.



The remains of William M. Rainey's home at 924 East Beach in Gulfport after Hurricane Katrina.

Bill Rainey worked as a volunteer at one of the Disaster Recovery Center's Legal Assistance tables coordinated through the Young Lawyers Division's Program, even though he was a victim himself.

*In a poignant note to *The Mississippi Bar*, Bill Rainey wrote "The Coast remains cautiously positive. Do not forget us, because the recovery is going to take a long time, and we are not in control of our destiny."*

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Even if lawyers could continue with or take on client cases, every single aspect of practicing has been made more difficult. Water destroyed files and mail could not be delivered for weeks following Katrina. Many lawyers who work in bankruptcy court and federal court now must drive to Hattiesburg to try their cases. "We have learned patience if nothing else. Everything, without exception, moves at a half pace," said Golden.

For Gulfport attorney Michael B. Holleman, the Katrina experience brought to mind an anonymous quote he discovered years ago: "Life here has been so strange that it will probably take years to figure out just what did happen." Holleman feels there is no way for those who experienced Katrina to truly know yet what they have experienced.

"The mind cannot grasp what has happened, not completely. Every day we witness the sights, sounds, despair and yes, the hope, left in the wake of this incredible storm. Oddly, our response is often to find something in the experience to laugh about," said Holleman.

Located in a 500-year flood plan, Katrina gutted Holleman's home of five months. The storm scattered nearly every possession over an area of a half-mile or more around what had been his newly settled-in home. His law office in Downtown Gulfport is still not fully operational today.

"Only recently have I been able to set up a desk and chair and hook up a phone line in a small space of the gutted, unheated rooms, with plywood for windows," Holleman said. "Each day I drive from temporary living quarters, my fourth since the storm, five miles down the beach to my office, and back again. Some days I do not even look up at the destruction, as if I cannot bear to feel or even see it."

Holleman expects that each person handled the storm in a different way. In his case, he used the opportunities that arose to volunteer as a means of escaping the horror of it all. He focused his efforts on helping other lawyers. After about six to eight weeks he then shifted focus to rekindling his practice and salvaging his own home and possessions. It was then that his personal experiences earned a place in the "miracle" department.

Weeks after he had ceased looking for

"stuff," he passed through his neighborhood and found his dining table hanging on a 10-foot fence. As he was climbing over the fence, he spotted the plant from his mother's funeral that he had kept and nurtured. It appears to have floated upright and rested about 15 feet high in a stand of bamboo. Coming back across the fence, he picked up a five-gallon bucket that was lying upside down to use for carrying debris. Once he turned the bucket over, he found an unframed 8 x 10 color photograph of his father, Boyce Holleman, which had been inscribed with a special note: "To one of those who has made my life worth living, my son, Michael."

As if these findings were not enough to uplift Holleman, recently, after his first court appearance since the storm, a court clerk presented him with a Bible that had his name engraved on the front. His



Weeks after Hurricane Katrina, Michael Holleman finds a photo of his father, the late Boyce Holleman, under a bucket in his neighborhood.

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Damage from Hurricane Katrina to the law office of Boyce Holleman, PA.

Photo by Michael Holleman

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father had given him that Bible and, still inside, it had negatives of pictures of his deceased father. He marveled over the fact that the Bible was in pristine condition and had not one bit of water or wind damage. This proved so unlike every other book in his house that had been ruined beyond recognition.

Many lawyers feel fortunate in spite of it all. For Gulfport attorney Derek R. Cusick to see his office, which is an old home converted for business, still standing was a shock. Because it sat atop a hill, the storm surge did not reach it.

“At first glance I was happy to see that the building had survived so well. Upon closer look inside the building I began to realize that it had received a heavy amount of rainwater and would take a great effort to repair,” said Cusick.

The wind blew all of the windows out and looters kicked in the front door shortly after the storm. A Small Business Administration inspector questioned whether the building would need to be demolished and completely rebuilt due to the extensive damage, which was not consistent with the less severe damage that the insurance adjuster reported.

“It was especially hard because I had spent the past two years renovating the building: installing crown molding, repairing the beautiful hardwood floors, painting, etc. I knew I had to do all the renovations again,” Cusick said. “Again, I was



Damage caused by Hurricane Katrina to Gulfport attorney James Thompson's office building.

more fortunate than most. My home in Orange Grove received very little damage. My office can be repaired. I did have the proper insurance in place.”

Even with all of the devastation to property and lives, many affected lawyers maintain a high level of optimism and even humor. Cusick jokes that he had a ‘boutique’ practice with only one employee to manage the office. Most of his clients ran small businesses like himself. He has relocated his practice to his home and has about 30% of his previous workload. “I

am not sure when the work will return to pre-Katrina levels. The good news is that my overhead is greatly reduced,” he said.

Many attorneys can tell of their personal tragedy and hardships since Katrina hit. In speaking with them however, one realizes that there is an underlying theme—‘there are so many who have lost so much more than I, I feel guilty even speaking of my problems.’ In spite of their personal hardships, many attorneys that were affected by Katrina appear to be more concerned about the well being of others.

“The deepest impression that I have about the Katrina experience, and I tend to think this was Mississippi’s experience, is the amount of love this storm engendered,” said Holleman. He knows firsthand about much of what has been done to help get the legal community to a reasonably functional level.

The fact remains that much still has to be done to completely rebuild lives, law practices and the courts. However, one cannot say that Mississippi lawyers lack the faith, hope or determination needed to emerge victorious from the most far-reaching disaster of Mississippi’s legal community history. ■

Past MS Bar President Don Dornan's office in Biloxi after Katrina.



Photo by Michael Holleman