

AGAINST *the* WIND



PHOTO BY TED JACKSON / THE TIMES-PICATUNE

Shannon Richard pulls a wagon of a few oil paintings from her home on General Haig. “There’s not much worth saving,” she said after going through her flooded home in Lakeview with her husband Scott, right, and her father, Randi Reboul.

Amy Baldwin White ('91)

Crystals from the muck

From total loss, one can learn what matters and what matters not.

WHEN AMY BALDWIN WHITE ('91) finally worked up the resolve to visit her abandoned home in the Lakeview neighborhood of New Orleans a month after it had been inundated, she was accompanied by her husband, John, her daughter, Summers, and a young man who was a friend of the family. Lake Pontchartrain water that had poured through a break in the 17th Street Canal levee on Monday, August 29, 2005, had reached the ceiling of their one-story house, and a gooey stew of foul muck still covered the floor and everything the Whites had owned except a few items they had taken with them in their

evacuation the day before the deluge. Somewhere in the slime were some of Amy's most precious possessions—her wedding album and the christening gowns that had adorned the infants in John's family at their baptisms going back for decades. Amy hunted for non-porous items of value; to salvage her china, she had to use a prybar to open the cabinet that contained them.

Summers, who was eight at the time, asked whether the water had entered her room. Of course, dear, Amy replied, and opened the door to look in. The scene was the same. The little girl wondered where the crystals that she kept in her closet—the ones that had been Amy's as a child and that

Amy's folks had given to Summers—might be and if they could be found. No sooner had Amy expressed her doubts than their young companion began digging in the muck with his hands. Soon he was pulling crystals from the putrescence and passing them to a delighted child.

Somehow, the story seems metaphorical of the many moments of beauty and joy that the Whites and so many other families in the New Orleans area have managed to extract from their horror and misery. Amy's ordeal—not only on a personal level, but also professionally, at her place of employment, Metairie Park Country Day School, which also was flooded—was difficult, no question. But the recent death of her best friend in college has taught her added lessons of what is truly of value. Sometimes, what we think matters, matters not.

Amy grew up in Durham, North Carolina, in a Wake Forest family. Her dad, Woody Baldwin ('66), played football for the Demon Deacons with Brian Piccolo, and he married his sweetheart at Wake Forest, Joy Brumbaugh ('66). Amy's sister, Kate Baldwin Hoyle ('94), and her husband, Wilson ('89), who was a star kicker on the football team, also are alumni.

Amy graduated as a mathematics major and was teaching in Kernersville in fall 1991 when she was lined up by Richard Currence ('89)—who at the time was dating her close friend and classmate, Molly Lane ('91)—for a blind date with his best friend, John White, who was visiting from their hometown of New Orleans. It was magic. The following year, Amy moved to New Orleans to be closer to John and accepted a teaching post at Metairie Park Country Day, a private school in the upscale Old Metairie area adjoining New Orleans. The couple married in 1994.

In 1999 John and Amy settled in Lakeview, a mostly white middle class area hard against the southern shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Their house was in a neighborhood nestled between the 17th Street Canal, which drains rainwater from the below-sea-level terrain, and City Park, the sixth-largest urban park in America. With two small children, two stable incomes (Amy had moved into the admissions directorship at Country Day in 2003), and second properties in Mississippi and Texas, they were living the good life in summer 2005.

Unlike most of the Big Easy, the Whites always evacuated the city during the sporadic warnings of advancing hurricanes that teased, sometimes promised, but never fully consummated

a liaison. In each evacuation, Amy always made sure to take along irreplaceable treasures—artworks, books, and especially her wedding album and the children's christening gowns.

On Friday, August 26, 2005, Summers stayed behind in the city while the rest of the family went to their Mississippi house; John's mother was to drive her up Saturday morning. But a monster hurricane that filled the Gulf of Mexico was gaining fury and lurching toward the Louisiana coast, and it was starting to look like it could be...would be...The Big One. By the

KEN BENNETT



Amy White: 'In my soul and heart, I'm positive.'

time the New Orleans Saints' preseason game in the Superdome had ended that evening, the storm was a killer Category 5, the most violent of hurricanes of which, in recorded history, fewer than half a dozen had ever made landfall in the United States. The following day, over a million people would be forcibly evacuated from the metropolitan area.

After hurricane proofing their property in Mississippi Saturday morning, the Whites returned home to rendezvous with Summers and her grandmother and prepare to leave. As they exited their home at 2 a.m., Sunday and headed to their overflowing vehicle, Amy chose to leave behind the wedding album and gowns. "I didn't

think we had enough room for them," she says ruefully. "Even today, I think of it and ask myself, 'Why did I do that?'"

By the time Hurricane Katrina made landfall just before daylight on Monday, it had diminished to a Category 3. But it still flashed sufficient teeth to gobble miles of precious wetland and barrel up the infamous Mississippi River Gulf Outlet into the lake, where the resultant storm surge put intolerable stress on levees and floodgates that would subsequently be judged substandard in their design and construction. After several dikes

in various parts of the city failed, lake water cascaded in, hell-bent to fill the bowl of the city to its own level.

By then the Whites were with friends in the Toledo Bend recreation area on the Texas-Louisiana border. They stayed there for a week, witnessing the first shocking images of the holocaust on television before driving down to Baton Rouge, the state capital situated seventy-five miles upriver from New Orleans. "It was hell," Amy says of Baton Rouge, to which much of the Crescent City had migrated in Katrina's immediate aftermath. "Everything was in short supply, long lines were everywhere, and houses were selling for outrageous prices on the spot. John wanted to buy a house in Baton Rouge, but every time I would go inside of one to have a look, I'd start crying. We thought we had a place to rent, only to have the owners renege on us because they could get more from someone else. Everybody was gouging. It was crazy; unbelievable."

The Country Day school campus had been flooded as well; more than a foot of water had invaded half of its

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buildings, including its library and gym. The response of school officials was swift and forceful. Within two weeks, they established satellite offices in Dallas, Houston, and Baton Rouge, which they asked Amy to head. Things were brightening on the family front as well. “Thankfully, we were able to rent a place to live,” Amy says. “And the private schools in Baton Rouge were wonderful. They set up special classes [for flood refugees], served us breakfast, helped us with uniforms for the children... I’m so thankful.”

Amy’s job was demanding, to put it mildly. “I didn’t have the staff I’d had,” she states. “We were trying to contact all of our parents, not knowing where many of them were. There were schedules to prepare, transcripts to obtain, an incredible volume of details. On top of it all, the grocery stores were closing at six, and even when they were open, they’d be out of things. [*Times-Picayune* columnist] Chris Rose wrote about the ‘new normal’ in the city—refrigerators sitting on street corners for a year; no restaurants; grocery

stores closing at six. I told John that what I craved the most was the normalcy of my past life. He’d say, ‘Your life is over,’ and I’d reply, ‘Quit saying that!’ In situations like that, all you want is your little life back.”

On November 7, 2005—barely two months after the storm had hit—Country Day reopened with a limited program. By January, it was back at full speed. A \$5 million capital campaign undertaken to repair the damage and recover lost tuition concluded successfully in summer 2007. Today, the only evidence that something traumatic had happened there is the commemorative sculpture in front of its main building. The Whites bought a house in Old Metairie not far from school. Eventually, they sold their house in Lakeview for half its pre-K value.

So the White family is back on high ground. But on that ground for Amy in the wake of the receding waters is suffering of a more intractable order. Last fall, Molly Lane, who ultimately had married Wake grad Michael Hall (’90), died of cancer, leaving behind

her husband and two children. Throughout a two-hour conversation about her Katrina ordeal, the only times Amy’s eyes welled with tears were when she mentioned Molly’s name.

“In my soul and heart, I’m positive [about the future of New Orleans],” Amy says. “But I am a little deflated about certain aspects. I hope the entire country learned something from this—the need for better response from government to disasters. We’ve been given a great opportunity to start over with the city’s school system, but [reformers] face a lot of obstacles. And I wonder: should we be shrinking the city’s footprint? Should we be rebuilding in the lowest areas that are most vulnerable to flooding?”

“Then I hear my housekeeper tell me that all she wants is for her family to be back in the Ninth Ward,” she adds. “She grew up there, her whole family was there, it’s where they felt most comfortable. I might not condone [her desire to rebuild in the vulnerable floodplain], but I can certainly understand it.”



PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

The lonely home of Gary and Diane Adams on Rose Street in Arabi over two years after Hurricane Katrina. They are surrounded by 14 gutted and empty lots. They’ve lived on this block for about 30 years and are the first to return.