

Unsettled in San Diego | Family that relocated after Hurricane Katrina is thankful for the kindnesses shown but finds the going tough

Jenifer Goodwin; The San Diego Union - Tribune; Oct 23, 2005; pg. E.1;

In New Orleans, Trent Lowe did what teenagers do: rode the streetcar, went to the movies and the mall with his friends, and graduated from high school in the spring.

He was able to do it all because of a motorized wheelchair, and an unwavering insistence on having his independence.

Trent was born without arms or legs. When younger kids would stare and ask what happened to him, Trent would reply: "God has my arms and legs."

Hurricane Katrina swept him away from his friends, his neighborhood, his church, all that was familiar. It also took his wheelchair.

Seventeen members of Trent's extended family made the harried pilgrimage to San Diego in the chaotic days after the storm. Five weeks into their stay in a National City Holiday Inn, they drove 27 hours back to New Orleans to see the damage for themselves.

Though they'd seen the wreckage on TV, they harbored the hope that maybe they could go home. "Seeing it killed those thoughts," said Trent's father, Ronald Lowe.

Now, back in San Diego, Trent's family is trying to determine whether or not this city, with its fast freeways and high rents, can become a new home.

Ronald needs a job, but the van he used to transport Trent and get to work broke down in Texas, and fixing it will cost more than the van is worth. With the clock ticking on their free hotel room, they're counting on several relief agencies to find them more permanent housing.

Even if they can find a house, Ronald worries how he'll replace his van, and whether he can find a job that will pay the rent in the months and years to come.

While his family struggles with those issues, to Trent, a single question trumps all the others: "When am I going to get back my chair?"

Earlier this month, it seemed as if the family's prayers were answered when Sam Amini, owner of a wheelchair store in Oceanside, donated a secondhand motorized wheelchair to Trent.

"I'm overwhelmed with the blessing," Ronald said.

But Trent looked sullen. His father had to coax him into the chair. "Now you don't have to sit in a hotel room waiting for somebody to push you," Ronald Lowe said.

He soon realized what was bothering his son. The wheelchair Trent lost was fast and custom-fit for him. Trent could pop wheelies, maneuver it effortlessly and keep up with his younger brothers -- even when they were on bicycles. His wheelchair was his legs, and now it was gone.

Trent knew he should act pleased with the replacement chair, but it was sluggish and hard to steer. All Trent could see was one more change he didn't ask for and didn't want. It was hard to seem grateful when he was holding back tears.

His father told Trent not to worry. They'd charge the battery back at the hotel. "Then we'll see how fast you go," he said.

Getting by

Even before they were wiped out by the hurricane, Ronald and Joann Lowe were used to getting by on a little.

They had no insurance, no bank account, no credit card. Ronald worked five days a week at \$8.25 an hour and a half day on Saturdays at a scrap yard. It was backbreaking, dirty work, stacking 40- pound bricks of crushed aluminum onto palettes. He came home smelling so much like trash that his wife wouldn't let him wash his uniform in her machine.

"It kept my back strong so I could pick up Trent," said Ronald, 53.

They'd met 28 years ago, when Joann was a single mother of three children. They married and had five more children: Ronald Jr., Reginald, Emmanuel, Trent and Travis. Their eight children now range in age from 17 to 33.

Raising so many kids isn't easy under any circumstances, but three of their sons have medical conditions that have made it tougher. Emmanuel and Travis have sickle cell disease, a blood disorder that causes bouts of severe pain and can require transfusions to treat.

Trent's condition, a rare birth defect, caused the family another kind of anguish.

Ronald was so distraught that he insisted doctors had given them the wrong baby. Joann recalled a doctor suggesting she put Trent in a home. She refused to consider it. "I have other sons at home. He'll fit right in," Joann told the doctor.

Ronald's change of heart came in the middle of the night, holding his swaddled son in his arms in the newborn intensive care unit. All around him, babies were being kept alive by tubes and machines.

Trent didn't need any special medical attention. "I'm looking around at all these babies in critical condition, and Trent had nothing wrong with him," Ronald said.

He asked a nurse why his baby was in the ICU. The nurse told him it was to keep visitors in the regular nursery from staring.

"I told her she don't have to worry about that. I ain't worried about what people are looking at," Ronald said. "My mind was clear. He was coming home with me."

Trent learned to brush his teeth, feed himself and write by holding the pen between his shoulder and his chin. When he got too big for Joann to lift him, Trent's brothers helped. They couldn't afford a wheelchair lift into the family van, so Ronald built one using plywood and clamps.

Ronald has replayed the decision to leave the wheelchair again and again. They planned to ride out the storm at home, then changed their minds and headed for a Rite Aid on higher ground where their son, Ronald Jr., worked.

Thinking they'd be away just a couple of days, they packed a few changes of clothes, a cooler with food from the fridge and all the money they had, about \$300.

When looters broke into the Rite Aid and a fire broke out, they fled.

After a night on a freeway overpass, the Lowes split up: Four of their children and their families went to Lake Charles, La., where the Red Cross was providing hotel rooms.

The rest headed for San Diego. Like so many of the estimated 2,400 evacuees here, they were drawn by a family member. Ronald Jr.'s wife, Jessica, had a brother here. Seven members of Jessica's family also made their way to San Diego.

In Texas, Ronald Sr.'s '86 Ford Econoline broke down. They rented a U-Haul and towed the van. Strangers, including a couple of guys on Harleys, filled their gas tank and paid for hotel rooms.

In San Diego, the Red Cross gave the Lowe family three rooms at the National City Holiday Inn, as well as money for food and clothing. "San Diego has been beautiful to us," Ronald said.

Despite the charity, they still feel lost. The freeways are faster and more intimidating than in Louisiana. Public transportation is harder to use. "I'm kind of nervous about venturing off too far," Ronald said. "You get lost so easily. It's not like home."

Ronald Jr., the only one with a running vehicle, has been driving them to the Red Cross Assistance Center and government offices to apply for aid.

"Thank God I have my son here," Ronald Lowe said. "He's a quick learner."

Sign from God

As bewildered as his parents seemed, Ronald Jr. was confident. From the minute they drove away from New Orleans, Ronald Jr. was sure they were headed in the right direction.

With his wife, Jessica, expecting their third child Nov. 1, they dreamed of raising their children somewhere other than New Orleans, where jobs were hard to come by, the schools had problems and crime was all too common.

The hurricane, Ronald Jr. and Jessica believed, was a sign from God that it was time to go. He used his last paycheck to buy a laptop to search for jobs and housing.

The prices were a shock. They'd been paying \$500 a month for a two-bedroom house in New Orleans. The cheapest he found here was a \$700 studio.

Then he came across a listing for a 650-square-foot, two-bedroom house in Logan Heights owned by Rebuilding Together San Diego, a nonprofit organization that renovates homes for low-income people and the elderly. Pamela Thorsch, executive director of the organization, offered Ronald Jr. and Jessica the newly renovated house for free through the end of the year, and then \$500 a month afterward.

They were thrilled, and moved in a few days later.

With that settled, Ronald Jr. started looking for a job. He earned \$11.70 an hour as an undercover security agent for Rite Aid. He had a job interview for a security supervisor just over a week ago, but postponed his second interview because he wasn't feeling well.

Jessica found an OB-GYN and had her first appointment since leaving New Orleans. The baby was fine, the nurse practitioner told her.

"I didn't want to go into labor on the road," Jessica said. "I wanted to hurry up and get here. Now, when I have the baby, at least we have a house to bring the baby to."

Facing reality

While Ronald Jr. was getting settled, his parents were thinking about going home.

Weeks ago, Ronald's boss had called, offering him his job back at the scrap yard. Before he could accept it, he needed to see if he still had a place to live in New Orleans. Joann wanted to see if any family photos had survived. Trent wanted to check on his wheelchair.

On Oct. 4, Ronald and Joann and three of their sons piled into a minivan, took turns at the wheel and headed for their house on St. Roch Avenue in the Eighth Ward.

It reeked of mold. The photos were ruined. The wheelchair was waterlogged.

A few hours later, having salvaged little but some video games and paperwork, they turned around and drove back to San Diego.

"Ever since I got out of school, I kept me a job," Ronald said. "And I don't have nothing to show for it."

No one wanted things to be as they were more than Trent.

His last motorized chair had given out two years ago. He'd spent most of the 11th grade with only a manual chair while waiting to get a new one through Medicaid.

The afternoon he got the new chair, he took it to his high school parking lot, put it on the highest speed and flew.

Last week, the donated wheelchair that they'd hoped was at least a temporary solution stalled in the middle of the street. The Oceanside store owner said he'd try to repair it for them.

Trent had other worries than the wheelchair.

In New Orleans, he knew the streetcar drivers and the regular passengers, and they knew him. He knew the clerks at the stores who'd help him with his money and purchases.

If his family stays here, he'll have to learn to negotiate a new public transit system. He'll need to find new people he can trust to help him when he's away from home. Meeting so many strangers means curious stares and questions.

At the Red Cross Assistance Center, a little boy sitting next to him asked him what happened to his arms.

Trent didn't answer.

Back in San Diego, the hotel that had seemed so comfortable started to feel unbearably claustrophobic.

Joann had trouble sleeping. "It really hits me at night," Joann said. "Sometimes I feel like I just want to run away from my family."

Their hotel room opens onto a catwalk six floors above the parking lot. "If we weren't strong, we'd want to run out there and jump off that railing," Ronald said.

In the days after the depressing trip to their old home, with the stalled wheelchair parked in a corner of the hotel room, the Lowes were feeling as down as they had since their ordeal began.

Then, things began to turn around.

Joyce Gibson, a volunteer with the St. Stephen Interdenominational Alliance, invited them to dinner at her home, along with a local TV news crew.

Employees at the Ability Center, a Kearny Mesa store that sells wheelchairs and handicapped-equipped vehicles, heard about the Lowes' plight and wanted to help.

Wednesday, Trent and his parents met with Claudia Obertreis and Cindy Jardensten at Ability Center. They described all the special features of Trent's lost wheelchair: custom pads that alleviate the pressure on his back and thighs, two seat belts to keep him in place, the special device that let him steer so easily.

Obertreis and Jardensten told him they thought they'd be able to get him a wheelchair like his old one, and possibly even a van.

Outside, Trent smiled for the first time in days. "I'm happy now," he said.

With the possibility of having transportation again, Ronald Lowe could begin to make plans. He wanted to take Trent to see the sights in San Diego, and maybe enroll him into school. "They're going to bring us complete happiness," Ronald Lowe said.