

LINDA

“I’ve been trying to get my medicine for my diabetes and stuff and since my insurance has stopped, I don’t have anymore.”

Linda, late 40s, caring for her 12 year-old disabled grandson in Baton Rouge, interviewed January 18, 2006

“We were doing very good.” Linda is an African American woman in her late forties. Although she is a widow with grown children, Linda did not live by herself before the hurricane. About a year before the hurricane, Linda started caring for her twelve year-old grandson, whose father was murdered. She also lived with one of her brothers in a rented apartment on the West Bank. With twelve brothers and sisters, Linda had lots of family close by for support. She said, “We were all living around the corner, down the street, across the street from each other.” Linda had a steady income from her job at Winn-Dixie, which allowed her to put a little money aside for savings. About life in New Orleans, Linda commented, “I liked it out there because I was working.”

Both Linda and her brother have diabetes. Linda has several other health conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis and depression and was getting treatment for them. Her grandson’s overall health is pretty good, but his vision is deteriorating because “he was born with one of his eyes not too good” and did not get proper treatment for it at a young age. Because of his vision problems, the grandson qualifies as disabled and receives checks from Social Security. When Linda and her grandson needed to see the doctor, they visited a clinic at the West Jefferson Medical Center. She commented, “I was able to see the doctor whenever I needed to.”

Linda was able to manage her conditions through the health coverage she received from Winn-Dixie. She did face out-of-pocket spending for her prescription drugs and doctors visits, remarking, “Although you have the health insurance, you still always have to pay a portion of it in order to get it.” When Linda took over custody of her grandson, his mother gave Linda a Medicaid card and said, “if you ever need to go to the doctor, just use that little gray card.” Linda was not told that she needed to reapply for Medicaid, and so her grandson’s Medicaid expired before the hurricane.

“They were going around the neighborhood with bullhorns.” Having been warned of the potential for flooding in her neighborhood by officials with bullhorns, a small group of Linda’s family waited out the hurricane in a high-rise condominium made available by her brother’s work. When news of the burst levees reached the group, Linda said “we need to go.” After stopping by Linda’s already flooding house to get a few items, they headed directly to Baton Rouge to seek shelter. Linda was able to bring a few things with her, including “my clothes and a couple of pill bottles, that’s about it, some money.” Linda, her grandson, and two others are now living in a small shelter behind a church. This is the second shelter they have lived in since the hurricane. They have no hot water or shower, so they boil water and use “big Tupperware-like tubs” to take a bath. Despite this, Linda thought their situation was better than in the previous shelter.

Since the hurricane, Linda has had difficulty sleeping because of anxiety. She explained, “Somewhere around three or four I will probably drift off, but then I am up at seven because I’ve got to get my grandson to school.” Much of Linda’s anxiety stems from her living situation and lack of a job. Her grandson has also had difficulty adapting to life after the hurricane. Linda observed, “It wasn’t until we got into the other shelter where he had a bed to sleep in that he really started calming down.” She wished her grandson could speak with a counselor. To help her grandson cope, Linda encourages him to write down his problems and feelings. She tries to stay positive in the face of all this, relying on her faith and family to persevere. She said, “I just go ahead and do the things that I need to do and read my Bible. That keeps me going.”

“I’ve been trying to get my medicine for my diabetes and stuff and since my insurance has stopped, I don’t have anymore.” In addition to the emotional challenges arising after the storm, Linda has had a difficult time managing her illnesses. She lost her job at Winn-Dixie after the storm and consequently lost her health coverage, which she discovered when trying to refill her prescriptions. As a result, she has gone without all of her prescriptions since the storm. She noted, “Ever since my insurance stopped, I don’t have any more.” Linda is trying to control her diabetes through better eating habits and said, “You know you need your medicine, you know you need to take it, but then you don’t have it, so therefore you just try to I guess eat right.”

“I haven’t been able to go to the doctor for it.” Linda has also had difficulty getting care for her and her grandson without health coverage. She traveled to the Baton Rouge General emergency room once when her grandson was very sick. She took him early

in the morning to avoid a long wait, and she reports, “They saw me right away.” Another time, when she tried to see a doctor to get her diabetes prescription renewed, she ran into difficulties. She said she was told “you need to get a letter from the shelter stating that you are an evacuee from New Orleans.” Linda plans on applying for Medicaid for herself and her grandson at the welfare office but is not sure of all the necessary steps.

Linda’s lack of access to health care has affected her health. She has had sinus problems that are left untreated and worsen every time she visits her home in New Orleans. She said, “Sinus is real, real bad, was really, really infected and I haven’t been able to go to the doctor for it.” Though she has not had any major complications with her diabetes, she noticed that “I do go to the bathroom more than I ever did, though, because they say that is one of the signs.”

“My biggest challenge now is getting into a home where we will feel like this is our home.” Though Linda would like to one day return to New Orleans, she also sees this as an opportunity for a new start with her grandson. She said, “After his daddy was murdered, I was like you know I really want to go somewhere else and start a new beginning with him. I didn’t want him to be around all that crime.” Linda is focused on making sure her grandson is stable and getting the education he needs and thinks that having a more secure living environment is a key step. Linda also views getting her job back at Winn-Dixie as very important financially and for her health. “If I can start working, I can reestablish myself with the insurance ... if I can go back to Winn-Dixie and they will accept me there, I know that will really, really be a blessing for me right now.”