

MICHELLE

**“Mentally I am tired...
I’m good one minute and the next minute
I can plunge.”**

Michelle, 37 years old, living in a hotel room under construction in New Orleans, interviewed February 1, 2006

“I cry a lot more than I ever cried in my whole life.”

Michelle is a 37 year-old African American woman with an 11 year-old son, Matt. Michelle moved to New Orleans in 2001 from Chicago, where her mother still lives. A self-described “tomboy,” Michelle was a hard-working, uninsured restaurant cashier before the storm. Though Michelle’s health was pretty good before Katrina, she did have eczema and sinus problems that required medical attention. Michelle also needed glasses to correct her vision.

Despite her lack of health coverage, she had become a savvy health care consumer and was able to navigate the patchwork system of free and reduced-cost charity care that existed in New Orleans prior to Katrina. Michelle received free care regularly at Charity Hospital and could be treated at Charity’s weekly dermatology clinic for her eczema. She also obtained free medications from Charity and several other programs in town and was tied into a free vision screening and glasses program. “[Before Katrina] if you didn’t have insurance, yes you had to wait in a line ... but you get what you need.”

Michelle left New Orleans alone on the Friday before the storm struck and drove toward Texas. Her son was visiting his grandmother in Chicago and her boyfriend, a self-employed tow-truck operator, refused to leave New Orleans. She made it across the border but ran out of gas in the middle of the night after sitting in traffic

for much of the day. After walking five miles and hitchhiking to the nearest gas station, she got her car back on the road and finally arrived in Houston. Once there, however, she had difficulty finding resources for people who had voluntarily evacuated from New Orleans prior to Katrina’s arrival. Without money or a place to stay, she called the police department for help, and eventually found a shelter in a Houston suburb. With most forms of communication taken out by the storm, Michelle spent her first few weeks in Houston alone and worried about her boyfriend’s safety; her son remained safe with his grandmother in Chicago.

“You could feel the difference in how people treated you.”

After a month in the shelter, Michelle had reestablished contact with her boyfriend. He reported that their place had flooded, but he was living with neighbors and the towing business was booming. Michelle wanted to return to New Orleans, but, with no place to live, she instead moved to a FEMA-sponsored apartment in Houston and began to look for work. She went on numerous interviews but could not secure a job and felt discriminated against as a Katrina survivor. She sensed that people viewed her as stupid or lazy, and, despite help from several community groups and churches, she could not find a job in the area.

“I’m displaced, but does that mean I have to accept wherever you want to put me?”

After three months in Houston, Michelle was able to visit her son and mother

in Chicago, then returned to New Orleans to live with her boyfriend in January. Jobs appeared plentiful in New Orleans since so much of the workforce had left or been evacuated, and reports of signing bonuses and high hourly wages at fast food restaurants were attractive. Housing proved to be more problematic, however. The neighbors who took in her boyfriend did not have room for one more in their FEMA trailer, so he and Michelle set out to find a hotel where they could live and prepare to rebuild their lives. The only availability was in a FEMA-sponsored high-rise hotel that had been under construction with no hot water or working elevators. Michelle and her boyfriend were required to sign a waiver prior to checking in acknowledging the construction and potentially unsafe conditions. “It’s not safe and it’s very hazardous to my health. I got mold on the wall so I am breathing that in every day.”

“I am so far behind in checks ups, I need a pap smear, I haven’t had one in about two years and I know that is not healthy.” In addition to the eczema, sinus and vision problems Michelle had before Katrina, she developed difficulty sleeping, an anxiety around water, and intestinal problems after the storm. Still lacking health coverage at the time of the interview, Michelle had been unable to see a doctor or fill a prescription since the storm. She was unable to find health care while living in Houston and had difficulty navigating the large and unfamiliar city. “I never knew Texas was so big,” she explained.

In New Orleans, the supply of free and lower-cost health services was dramatically reduced. Few clinics were open, and those that were had very limited slots for non-emergency visits. Despite her drive and knowledge of the health care system in New Orleans, every

resource Michelle knew of was unavailable at the time of the interview. As she said, “People are used to be able to go to Charity Hospital.” Even in the case of an emergency, Michelle feared the one emergency clinic that was open in the New Orleans Convention Center: “I don’t want to go in the Convention Center after all the stuff that went down ... I could imagine what’s down there!”

“I learned from Katrina—budgeting is a whole new concept.” The affordability of health care was a critical issue for Michelle. She needed to get new eyeglasses, but she worried about paying for the eye exam. “You can go in there and give him \$20 dollars, you get your eyes examined and glasses. I just haven’t been there, because I really didn’t have it. They say, ‘it’s only \$20 dollars, it’s only \$15 dollars,’ when you are budgeting every cent. I learned from Katrina—budgeting is whole new concept.” Without access to affordable doctors and prescriptions, Michelle has been “trying to home-remedy” herself to manage her health issues.

“It’s mental issues that is going to come after this ... this wasn’t just your average storm, I got washed out. My thing is who is preparing us for the aftermath?” Michelle expressed concern that there were no counseling resources available for the thousands like her who were suffering such great emotional trauma. Michelle was trying to piece her “washed out” life back together; although still unemployed at the time of our interview, Michelle had several job offers and was helping out with her boyfriend’s towing business in the interim. Michelle hoped to leave the unsafe living situation at the hotel for a new apartment soon, though rents had more than tripled since the storm. Michelle predicted that she would eventually leave the area, hopefully, to be reunited with her son Matt.