

Meet Mack

I met Mack S. (last name withheld for privacy) yesterday in my garage as he was walking up to knock on our door. He was looking for a neighbor, Margaret, who's unfortunately in a nursing home after suffering a series of debilitating strokes. Mack is a big black man, 66 and retired but working part-time as a security guard. But more importantly, Mack is from New Orleans.

He had left there on Thursday after making sure his truck was securely parked at the airport. He had been working when Katrina hit. During the storm's height he had opened an exterior door to take a look at the storm but the wind blew the door out of his hand and he was stuck outside when the door locked shut behind him. He was soaked to skin in seconds, he said, but was able to call someone inside with his cell phone and they opened a door to let him back in. When he finally left work, he left New Orleans, too.

Mack's home is submerged. He had recently replaced the roof and siding and installed central air conditioning. Mack works with leather and other textiles and his house was taken over by his tools. He had purchased a new sewing machine just a couple of weeks before the storm. Mack told me he had seen a picture of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in his home as he was a boy. Joseph was working at his craft in his workshop. Mack asked his father if men really used to work in their own houses and his father told him yes, that everyone did back then. Mack thought that was a really good thing and he's had a home shop for as long as he's had his own home. Mack had just completed a new leather hat for himself with a band made of Liberty silver dollars. Tandy Leather sells them for \$5.95 each already modified for attachment. The hat had 10 of them around the band. It was hanging in a place of honor in his house along with other pieces of work he had made. They're all underwater.

Despite losing everything, Mack considers himself lucky. More importantly, he considers himself smart. Although he was working during the storm, he had a feeling that things would be bad and parked his truck up on the interstate. When he was finally done with work, he knew there was no sense going home so he headed out of New Orleans, intending to go as far as the gas in his tank would take him. As he was leaving he remembered that the security company he worked for had an office at the airport, with its own secure parking lot. Mack said that when he pulled into the parking lot his "Low Fuel" light had just come on. He left his truck in their lot, hid his pistol, and made his way to the terminal. He can't be totally sure nothing will happen to it, but even if it's towed, it will be to a secure impound lot.

They were flying people out of New Orleans on the planes being used to ferry people and supplies in for the rescue effort. Mack could have gone to Chicago at no cost but they were requiring people to have friends or relatives there who could take them in. Mack didn't, and although they were willing to just write down a name, he didn't feel that it was right for him to take the place of someone who did have connections there. He told them that he did have family here in Rochester and he was able to get here, also for free.

The Red Cross and Sears had both given him vouchers for clothing and personal necessities, appreciated since he had only his work clothes left. But Mack isn't worried about money. His

Social Security and retirement money are not in New Orleans banks and he can use a debit card to draw from when he needs to. He's owed pay from his security job, but he realizes it could be some time before he sees that money. The future of his job, and the jobs of thousands of others, remains in question.

Mack has little sympathy for the able-bodied folks that stayed and expect the government to bail them out. He thinks they should have gotten out, like he did, when they had the chance. But he's also angry at the shortsightedness of the government, too. He feels they should have had buses, food and porta-potties up on high ground before the storm arrived, like he did with his truck. He's lived in New Orleans a long time and this isn't the first storm to wreak havoc there yet so little was done to prepare for Katrina. But he said he's seen this in lots of people there, shrugging off previous flooding and rebuilding in the same places as if they were never flooded.

For someone who'd lost almost everything, Mack was surprisingly upbeat. He's alive and so is all of his family there, although a least some are in the Houston Astrodome. He's got no real financial worries right now, a place to stay and a vehicle to get around in. He's content to visit family and old friends in Rochester for the time being. He has no strict timetable to return to New Orleans. He'll have to, of course, someday if for no other reason than to settle the insurance claims. There's no hurry.

So now you've met Mack. Not a Katrina victim, a Katrina *survivor*. I hope there's a lot more like him.