

## Family leaves battered Gulfport behind, plans to rebuild life in Napa

By CARLOS VILLATORO  
Register Staff Writer

On a muggy Friday afternoon, Shannah Fowler got her hair done in downtown Napa's Nevaeh Salon. A tattooed stylist prepared to add highlights to Fowler's hair, while Shannah's mother-in-law, Deborah Fowler, got a massage.

The serene scene was a welcome relief for the 27-year-year-old mother of three, who just seven days ago was scrambling to stay alive after Hurricane Katrina destroyed her home in Gulfport, Miss.

"People's roofs were peeling off like Play-Doh," she said. "It was something out of an end-of-the-world movie. My house flooded (and) a tree went through my son's bedroom."

Fowler, her husband Jason, children Anthony, 5, Isaac, 2, and Angelina, 1, were not hurt. But the hurricane destroyed the life they started in Mississippi just four months ago. Job prospects and a lower cost of living lured the family to Gulfport from their home in Vallejo, Shannah Fowler said.

After their home was torn apart, they camped nearby for four days, battling huge bugs, bathing and washing their clothes in river water and conserving the little food and drinking water they had. Some neighbors sold bags of ice for \$10 a piece, and looters ransacked stores looking for food, water, diapers and other necessities, Fowler said.

"(I thought) what's next?" Fowler said. "Where's the help? Where's everybody at? FEMA was just a rumor down there."

### Family to the rescue

Here in Napa, Jason's parents were surprised to see their son's name in a newspaper article about the destruction. Deborah and Jerry Fowler decided to drive down to Mississippi and get the family out.

They left Napa on Sept. 1 and were doing fine until they arrived in Louisiana.

"It was incredible," Deborah Fowler said. "It was just total devastation."

With no fuel available at gas stations, the Fowlers backtracked 92 miles for some gas. When they entered Mississippi they were able to get a police escort into Gulfport and located their son and his family.

"The feeling was just relief," she said.

"We are grateful to be out of there," Shannah Fowler said. "She pretty much rescued us."

On Sept. 9, the Gulfport Fowlers arrived in Napa, where they hope to rebuild their lives, Shannah Flower said. Catholic Charities donated some clothes and other items. Cope Family Center is working to get the family situated, and Nevaeh donated the salon services.

Nevaeh's Amanda Poole said she will donate such services to any hurricane victim. She said as the Fowlers and others settle down and look for jobs in their new hometowns, it is important that they regain the confidence and stability they need to accomplish their goals.

The episode, she said, "makes you think of everything you take for granted, like buying new clothes for a job interview."

The Fowlers oldest child has been enrolled in a local school, and Shannah and Jason Fowler hope to move out of their parents' two-bedroom condo and get jobs in Napa, Shannah Fowler said.

Federal response late

Shannah Fowler said that federal relief arrived at they same time their parents were hauling them to safety in Napa.

"I don't feel that (the emergency) response was quick enough," she said. "I feel if it were a richer area, they would have been there right away."

On Friday, President Bush vowed to do what it takes to rebuild the Gulf Coast states and to find out what went wrong with the federal government's response to the hurricane.

"The system, at every level of government, was not well coordinated and was overwhelmed in the first few days," Bush said recently. "It is now clear that a challenge on this scale requires greater federal authority and a broader role for the armed forces, the institution of our government most capable of massive logistical operations on a moment's notice."

Photo editor Sarah Orr contributed to this article.

**Napa Valley Register © 2007**