



## Searching for Lillian

**Lillian had stayed behind in New Orleans to protect the only life she knew: her home**

By SEAN PENN

Watching the scenes of devastation from New Orleans on my television set was like standing behind the tape line at a traffic accident and watching a child slowly bleed to death unattended. I have great friends in Louisiana. Were they all right? And, Christ, the people trapped in the flood zone, the Superdome and the Convention Center. Where were the food drops, security, water, medical attention? And the hospitals. Why were their calls for help being ignored?

In the first days of the disaster, I called James Carville several times and asked him if I should go to New Orleans to help. "Stay where you are," he told me each time. "You'll only be in the way." Which was my concern as well. But four days in, James called me. "The hell with it," he said. "We should be ashamed of ourselves. Do whatever feels right."

On CNN, I watched as Dorian Browder, who had evacuated New Orleans with her family just before the hurricane struck, pleaded with authorities for assistance. "Why would they not be prepared? I don't understand it. What are they doing every day in their offices?" she said. "We have run out of moneys. We have no homes to go to." Dorian and her two sons had been sleeping in a car for three days in front of the motel in Baton Rouge where the rest of her family was staying, five people to one small room. Dorian's seventy-eight-year-old mother, Lillian, had stayed behind in New Orleans to protect the only life she knew: her home, located just blocks from the breach in the 17th Street levee.

And that was it. For me, Lillian represented all the friends I couldn't reach, all the abandoned people left behind in New Orleans. I called Dorian at the motel, wired her money for an additional room and promised to meet her in Baton Rouge.

Connecting through Houston, I picked up my friend Doug Brinkley, director of the Roosevelt Center for American Civilization at Tulane University. A New Orleans resident, Doug had evacuated the city with his family, arriving in Houston with thousands of others fleeing the floodwaters. The prop plane I had hired to take us to Baton Rouge would not be available until the following morning, so Doug and I made our way to the Astrodome to register Lillian as missing. Despite the otherwise great efforts of the Red Cross, there was no centralized system to identify and keep track of the thousands of people spread out across the floor of the stadium. If Lillian were here, I realized, she was safe for the moment -- but if she was still in New Orleans, her life was certainly in danger.

The next day we touched down in the late-morning heat of Baton Rouge and met with Dorian at the motel. She is an articulate woman of enormous strength, and her emotions were high. For all she knew, her mother had drowned inside her own home. We hitched a ride into New Orleans with the state police, hoping to find Lillian and help in any way we could.

The next few days were filled with tragedy. Bloating bodies floating facedown in the black, toxic water. The sky full of helicopters. Yet no Lillian. I had never seen her face, but throughout my time in New Orleans, I could not get the image of her out of my head. So many were suffering, but my brief connection with her daughter had given this a personal edge.

Unable to reach her home because our boat had too deep a draw, we shared her address with an airboat captain and launched elsewhere. We spent the next eight hours on the water, rescuing those we could and transporting them to the extremely prepared and accommodating Ochsner Hospital.

With thousands of additional National Guardsmen coming in the following day, all of my clothes contaminated, and a growing and inappropriate press focus on my presence, I decided to get out of Dodge and continue the search for Lillian in the shelters of Baton Rouge and Houston. Back at the Astrodome, I did what I could to lend a hand but felt I could do more good by heading home and raising some money on the West Coast. Doug and I were three minutes from Houston airport when Dorian's son Jarrod called my cell phone. He had just been contacted by Lillian, who was indeed at the Astrodome.

We made a U-turn and hustled through the arena. There, among the thousands of cots, was Lillian. She was just as I'd pictured her, with a paper hat covering her undone hair and a smile that said, "Any friend of Dorian's is a friend of mine." For the next six hours I sat with Lillian and the devoted volunteers who had been caring for her, until Dorian, Jarrod and Dorian's sister Shirley arrived from Baton Rouge. Around midnight, Doug and I took the family to a hotel. Everyone needed sleep.

In the morning, I went by their room to let them know that my mother was offering them her home in Los Angeles. They needed some time to discuss this with Lillian, the matriarch, who at the moment was complaining about the designer slippers the hotel had provided her. She wanted her own slippers. And that's what she and the other victims of this horrible tragedy deserve: their own slippers, their own lives back.

Dorian tried to get a word in with her mother. Pointing to me, she said, "Do you know what this young man's gone through to get us back together?" To which Lillian replied, "Well, of course he did." She knows how important she is. Let's see if our country does.

(Posted Sep 22, 2005)