

Displaced immigration clerk hits ground running

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Body

A week after Hurricane Katrina, when Joannettia Lewis called Veterans Affairs about refilling a prescription in Birmingham, a message was waiting for her: "Your job is trying to find you!"

Lewis, a 13-year **immigration clerk** working at the Atlanta office of the counsel for the U.S. Bureau of **Immigration** and Customs Enforcement, lived in New Orleans until Katrina put her lower Ninth Ward home underwater. Supervisors knew she lived alone, so they did everything they could, even contact the VA to put her on a locator list, to find out what became of her.

Federal officials in New Orleans had decided to temporarily move operations to Oakdale, La., and they wanted to know if Lewis, 49, could go back to work with them. But after a traffic-choked, 20-hour drive with her parents, sister and a nephew to evacuate to Birmingham, where an aunt lives, Lewis told her bosses she wanted to stay close to her family.

So officials, who worked to find positions for all the **displaced immigration** workers coming from the Gulf Coast, found her a job in Atlanta, where ICE Chief Counsel Terry Bird struggled to keep case files in order with only two student workers because a hiring freeze barred him from bringing in new help. Lewis, quickly filled the void.

"She's really helped us out," Bird said. "She's been great."

It's Lewis' job to keep court case files up to date with all the forms, notices and briefs in chronological order. She also tracks those files when they end up in judges' chambers or are borrowed by attorneys.

Many of the files were in disarray when Lewis arrived, with some documents missing and others misfiled. The students were doing the best they could, but there were certain documents they weren't allowed to handle.

Stacks and boxes of files formed towers on the office floor and spilled out into the reception area until Lewis managed to impose some order. She began working on upcoming and recent cases first. Now she's down to the older files.

"We're getting closer," she said. "We're just about caught up."

Some of Lewis' co-workers from New Orleans also ended up in Atlanta, working in other offices. She met one by chance in a courthouse hallway, as she headed to pick up her new employee ID and heard someone call her by her nickname, Nettie.

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"God, was I glad to see somebody from New Orleans," Lewis said.

Cheryl Lewis, another friend who works in the deportation office of ICE, said she was also happy to find other New Orleanians when she first arrived in Atlanta.

Those were the friends who helped her cope with the big and little problems of life in a new place, such as learning how to find the office and figuring out the traffic.

Now, she has made a few new friends as well, and is making a point of getting to know the city that took her in.

"I want to go to the Martin Luther King museum," Cheryl Lewis said. "I'm looking forward to getting in as much of the sights as I can before I leave."

After two months, Lewis is still going home to a Best Western hotel room at the end of the day. She hasn't ventured back to New Orleans yet to see the damage from Katrina and Hurricane Rita, which hit her neighborhood just weeks later. Law enforcement officers are not allowing residents in.

Not that Lewis wants to hazard it. She suffers from several chronic health conditions, including hepatitis contracted while she was in the military. She fears returning to a less-than-healthy environment, where medical services might be compromised.

"All the mud and all the pesticides, I don't need to be breathing that kind of stuff at this point," she said.

Lewis thinks it may be as much as a year before she visits her own two-bedroom home again.

In the meantime, she figures she has plenty to do in Atlanta.

"I'm going to have to stay for a little while," she said smiling. "Terry needs me."

Graphic

Photo: BECKY STEIN / SpecialJoannettia Lewis, who left New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina put her home underwater, has fit right in at the Atlanta office of the counsel for the U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. She also has made some new friends in her new city.

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