

York native lives through Hurricane Katrina

BY JOHN SLYKHUIS
Staff Writer

As the blustery remnants of Hurricane Katrina brought light rain to York Region yesterday, a former East Gwillimbury family that lives near New Orleans was cleaning up.

Jason Gwyn, wife Michelle and children Karleigh, 6, and Jami, 3, were in their boarded-up home east of Baton Rouge when the unblinking eye of the monster crept past, its winds screeching amid a

slashing torrent of rain, lightning, thunder and tornadoes. The latter he is familiar with, having survived the Barrie tornado more than 20 years ago that destroyed part of the family home.

Mr. Gwyn, 34, who, until the move to a Louisiana hospital last year was a registered nurse working in the emergency department at Southlake Regional Health Centre, spoke exclusively to York Region Newspaper Group as Katrina was clos-

ing in Sunday night and then again Tuesday when it had passed, leaving a trail of devastation and tragedy. Here's how it played out.

SUNDAY

"We loaded up with lumber at Home Depot, but forgot to get a generator," he said.

When they returned to get one, they were all sold out. "They said they sold \$100,000 worth in the last 24 hours."

Things such as bottled

water, batteries and food were also flying off the shelves of the nearby Wal-Mart, he said.

He and a neighbour were gathering up loose items and lawn furniture, taping and boarding windows when Katrina announced her imminent arrival.

"We just had a violent rainband go through and the winds are just starting to pick up. We're supposed to have F-5 winds later on. My neighbour's an engi-

neer with the state and he said the levees are going to collapse."

TUESDAY

The power came back on just before noon, but only cellphone service was available and sporadic. They finally got through.

"Oh my God, it's devastating what's happening in New Orleans," Mrs. Gwyn said as she answered the phone.

"We got through OK," she said.

At the height of the storm, as hurricane force winds buffeted their home, the couple kept the girls distracted by playing games.

"We tried to get their minds off what was going on outside," he said.

In the storm's aftermath, the weather continued to be a story, as temperatures soared into the high '90s with humidity to match, which added to the suffering of people, most of

whom have no air-conditioning, fresh water, food and other essentials.

"It's pretty ugly," Mr. Gwyn said.

There were serious breakdowns in law and order as desperate survivors began looting.

"A friend advised me to get a gun," he said.

"I called the hospital a little while ago and they've instituted a disaster plan. I'm just waiting to hear back from them," he said, adding they were expecting a number of patients evacuated from the big Tulane Hospital in New Orleans that was flooded out.

YESTERDAY

National Guard troops arrived in Baton Rouge yesterday to control an increasingly deteriorating situation, Mr. Gwyn said.

"Refugees from New Orleans have started to come in and they're setting up camp in the Wal-Mart parking lot," he said.

Rhonda lost 28 pounds and 64 inches!

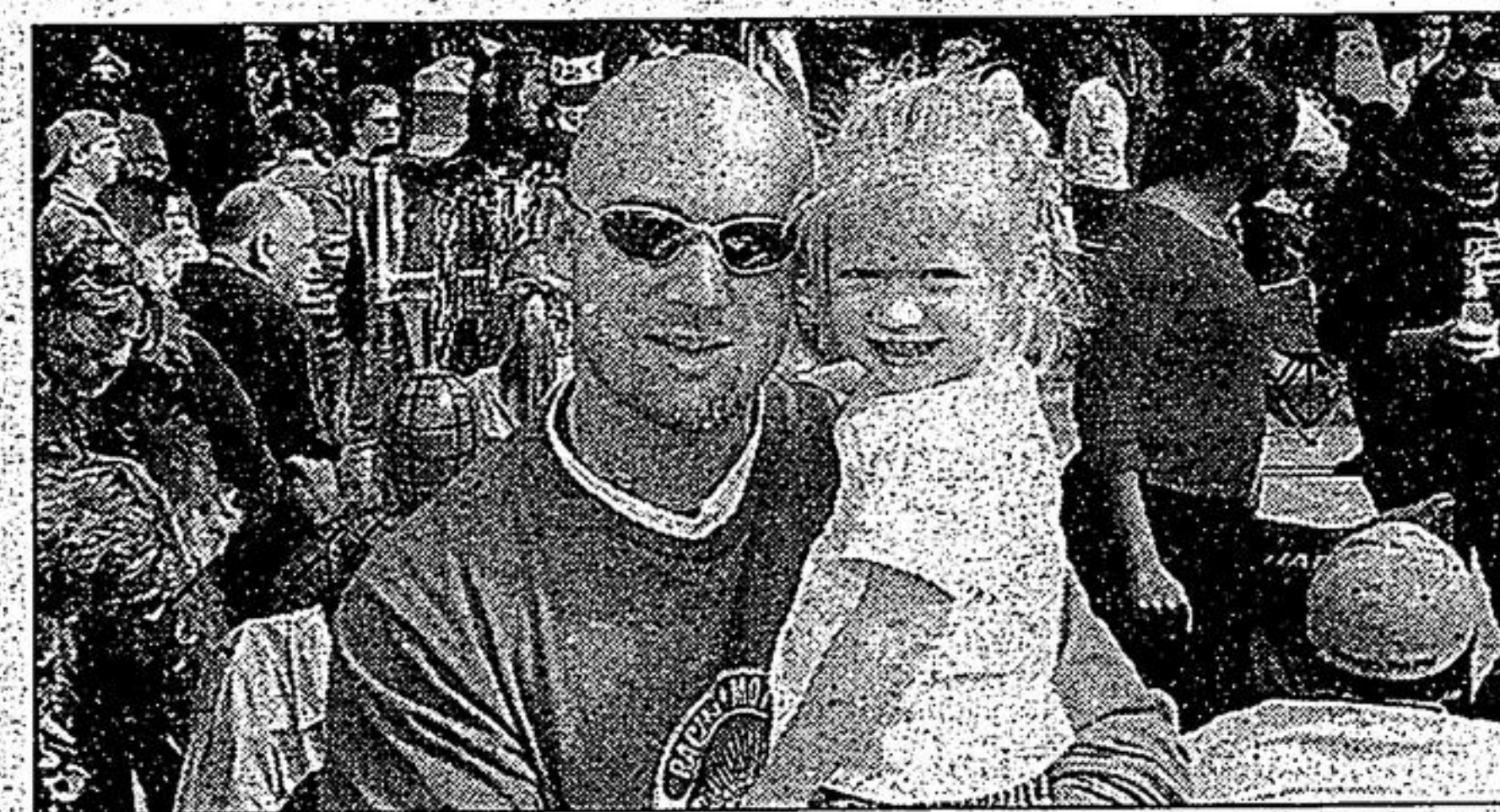
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Former East Gwillimbury resident and Southlake Regional Health Centre ER nurse Jason Gwyn, with daughter Karleigh live just east of Baton Rouge.

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