

Locals offers Katrina family shelter from the storm

BY VINCENT HANCOCK
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"Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger, Fails my heart, I know not how; I can go no longer." "Mark my footsteps, my good page, tread now in them boldly, You shall find the winter's rage freeze your blood less coldly."

In the old carol "Good King Wenceslas," a royal aide laments to the King that the fierce weather is too difficult to bear. Yet Wenceslas urges him to push ahead and follow his lead, so that they might deliver food and fuel to a man in dire straits. Far from his throne, the King has little wealth to spread, but still he succeeds in helping a fellow human meet basic needs.

This year, a Traverse City neighborhood is settling down for the season with an entire family that sought refuge from severe weather. Amy Jones and her fiancé Andy Alcalá fled north after Hurricane Katrina flooded their New Orleans home. With their young son, Ridge, and the family's Great Dane in tow, the couple needed immediate shelter. It had to be long-term, since Amy was due to give birth to a second child in a matter of weeks.

After learning of the hurricane's destruction, longtime Fife Lake residents Bob and Stephanie Reamer, like



Bob and Stephanie Reamer, from left, donated their home to Amy Jones and Andy Alcalá and their family. "The place seemed as if it were meant to be ours," Jones said. "There was already a nursery here painted a boy's color."

Record-Eagle/Greg Undeen

where to settle with their few possessions.

"We had what we could fit in our vehicles," Jones said.

It was quickly furnished with new and donated goods, thanks to the Reamers' business associates and family friends. Stephanie Reamer found the level of engagement rewarding.

"We've all kind of adopted the family," she said. "So many people did what they could at the drop of a hat."

Jones was equally as delighted, if not more so, to see a special provision.

"We went from not having a place to sleep because of our dog, to having a dog bed bought for our dog," Jones said.

The couple also discovered several magical coincidences: the nursery room was already decorated in blue, though Amy hadn't told anyone the newborn's gender. Jones' new obstetrician shares the same birthday as Jones, too — and his daughters have Jones' first and middle names.

Since moving in, their new neighbors greeted Jones and Alcalá with a refreshing openness.

Jones lauds New Orleans for its culture and excitement, but the uncertainties inherent in such a large-

scale recovery effort worried her.

"I would have loved to have been a part of it, but in

my position, I didn't have the time or the capability to wait," she said. "When you have kids, you can't afford to do that."

Jones hopes the best for New Orleans, but for now, she's looking ahead to a new life here. Within a year, Jones and Alcalá hope to buy the house — once unthinkable after her family's uncertain journey north.

"I didn't know if I was leading my family in the right direction," she said.

"You never know. You just have to follow your gut."

For all involved, giving has been contagious. Jones hopes to offer a Cajun-style dinner to her neighbors once her son is born. Bob Reamer brushes aside any special praise for him and his wife, but hopes others might see the offer as a tangible form of helping others.

"We lead by example," he said. "One's first instinct might be to write a check, but sometimes it's better if you can match a need."

While Jones and Alcalá found a house in Traverse City, it was people who made it a home.

Page and monarch, forth they went, forth they went together, Through the cold wind's wild lament and the bitter weather.

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Ridge Benoit, 9, having fun in his family's new backyard.

many, asked themselves how they might best help. They found they possessed, again, the Silver Lake-area house they owned decades earlier. As former occupants and the owners of the family business, VeriTech Appraisal, the Reamers knew the house's value. But the house sat vacant while it was on the market. Suddenly, the Reamers both realized what they could offer.

"We both said, 'I can't believe you thought of that,'" Bob Reamer recalled. "We decided that we would carry the mortgage for a year."

If a Gulf Coast family could pay the utilities, a home — free of charge — was waiting.

Jones and Alcalá, meanwhile, struggled to decide

Her maternity schedule washed away when her employer's medical office was flooded and re-opened too far away. Alcalá, only a few semesters shy of his degree in business management, had to abandon his plans when the college flooded. With the encouragement of Jones's father, living in Kingsley, the couple came to northern Michigan. Yet state agencies couldn't find an apartment that accepted pets, let alone a large dog. One agency representative remembered a local offer, however.

"She said, 'I know someone who may be able to help you, and he has dogs, too,'" Jones recalled.

Within days, the two couples met and the Reamers quickly invited Jones and Alcalá to stay at the house.



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Katrina refugees Andy Alcalá and Ridge Benoit play with their Great Dane, Gracey, in the backyard of their new home.

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