

After The Storm

Hurricane Katrina survivor Maria Martinez tells us how things are really going in the big not-so-easy

By Maria Martinez as told to Tracey Porpora

Maria Martinez, a 37-year-old triathlete and dental hygienist, took her determination to succeed to a new level after losing everything she and her now-husband owned when Hurricane Katrina socked New Orleans with a devastating blow in the early morning hours of Aug. 29, 2005. Still in shock from losing her home, she picked herself up last October to compete in one of the most physically challenging athletic competitions: the Ironman World Championships. Maria spoke with CW contributing editor, Tracey Porpora, about how she kept it together during one of the deadliest hurricanes this country has ever experienced, and how she is rebuilding her life today in the city she will always call home.

I'm proud to say I was born and raised in New Orleans. In fact, I lived in Mid-City, which is right down the street from the French Quarter where Mardi Gras takes place. Before the hurricane hit, I was living in my long-time family home with my mom, who is 80-years-old. She had gotten a flight out of town to Houston. But the day before the hurricane I was training for the Ironman World Championships, which is a race that requires competitors to swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles, and run a 26.2 mile marathon. My routine consisted of getting up at 4 a.m. to train before going to work as a dental hygienist at a local dentist's office. That Saturday I rode 120 miles, and ran 10 miles. I also usually swim a mile, but everyone kept saying to leave town. When you grow up in New Orleans, you're used to evacuating. Because I was training, I felt like I didn't have

time to evacuate. However, we later saw the forecast wasn't good. So my then-fiancé, Marc Ducote, and I packed some clothing, my bike, two dogs and his cat in the car, and we left at 2 a.m. Because there was no organized plan to get people out of the city, it took 16 hours in bumper-to-bumper traffic to get to my brother's house in Houston. People were having road rage, cars were running out of gas, and people were fighting at gas stations. It was a very desperate, and scary situation.

Seeking Refuge

My brother already had about 25 friends and family at his house. We were sleeping on floors, sofas, and all over the place. We also shared a hotel room in Houston with Marc's parents for awhile. We all thought we'd just go home after the hurricane hit. It didn't look so bad on television until the levees in Lakeview broke, and then the levees all over the city broke. That's when the city filled up with water. We just sat there with our mouths open staring at the TV. Marc went back to New Orleans about a week later. People were desperate; they had no way out. Because of this, people were shooting people who had vehicles. One night when Marc got home, he couldn't even talk. He said he'll never tell me about the things he saw—that's how bad it was. He couldn't get into our homes because the water was so high, but you could pull up to the roofs on a boat. My home in Mid-City, Marc's home in Lakeview, and his bicycle shop in Uptown were totally demolished. I lost everything I owned. The dentist I worked for lost everything too. I knew people who stayed during the hurricane, and had to be flown out from their rooftops. I knew people who floated around for three days. I knew people who died in their homes because they couldn't get out.

We couldn't go back home, so my brother's neighbors generously allowed Marc and I to stay in a room above their garage. I couldn't move. I felt paralyzed. I was used to working a full-time job, and also training full time. It wasn't like me to not be able to get up. But when I'd get up, I'd cry. When I'd go to bed, I'd cry. Then I said to myself, "Katrina took everything from me, but she hasn't taken one thing--what's inside of me, my will to continue." So I pushed myself to get out and run. There was a reason why I was here, and people were being so kind to me. I had to compete in the world championships for New Orleans. I had to inspire people to do things they might not think they could do.

Rebuilding A Life

After six years of dating, Marc and I were scheduled to be married in October in Hawaii after I competed in the world championships. But we called off the wedding because we needed that money to help rebuild our lives. Then, one day we went to the Red Cross in Houston. I met a man there named Rob Purdy, who was wearing a shirt that said "Kona" on it. I told him I was going to Kona, Hawaii to race in the world championships, and he told me he was a pastor, and used to live there. He put me in touch with a woman named Lynn-Maria Lara of the Waikoloa Baptist Church in Kona. I like to call her my fairy godmother. She made a few phone calls, and it escalated to the point where everyone wanted to help us have a wedding. The Fairmont Orchid Hotel in Hawaii gave us a \$50,000 elaborate barbecue wedding for 26 friends and family that was filmed for The Food Network. From the flowers to the wedding rings, everything was donated. Another amazing thing was the shop where I bought my wedding gown also relocated to Houston, and one of only a few dresses out of thousands that wasn't lost in

the hurricane was mine. This just proves that God pays attention to detail, and gives you back things tenfold.

Despite not being able to train properly and losing 13 pounds, I went to Kona in October to compete. This was a very big accomplishment for me. In 2000, I did my first Ironman competition. Before that, I wasn't an athletic person at all. I didn't even know how to swim. I soon fell in love with the competition, and qualified for the world championships in Hawaii, which means I placed number one in my age group. To push your body to that extreme, and see that you can do it, makes you feel like you can conquer anything. The world championships took place on Oct. 15, 2005, and I placed 37th in my age group. Then on Oct. 18, I had the fairytale wedding I had dreamed of all my life.

Going Home

In December we went back to New Orleans. And it's an ironman competition every single day you wake up. The smell of mold and mildew is so bad. It's very dark and scary. You can't buy all the foods you need at the store. You can't talk on your cell phone. There are car wrecks everywhere because there aren't any traffic lights or stop signs. People are looting still-flooded homes because they have nothing. There is no normalcy anywhere. We are living in an apartment with my in-laws, and everything we own was found in the garbage.

After months of bidding wars, we bought a home near Tulane University that is 8 ½-feet above sea level. It needs work, and it's very hard to get people to work on your house at this time. The cost of materials has skyrocketed. I'm working at a few different dental offices, and Marc has been able to reopen his bicycle shop in another location. We

hope to start a family soon, and it has to be in New Orleans. I have to be part of the rebuilding, especially because there is so much tragedy and sadness here. But if we just keep pushing, I know we can hold the city together.