

Hurricane Katrina Handout

Katrina 'Children' Share Emotional Stories of New Orleans

By Soledad O'Brien
CNN

NEW ORLEANS, Louisiana (CNN) -- Eighteen-year-old Amanda Hill sits on a plastic lawn chair in a gutted home, talking straight into a camera.

She looks shell-shocked, as if she has survived a war, and in a way that is exactly what has happened. Amanda and her grandmother lost their home and their livelihood as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

"I know what it is like not to have the finer things in life," she says, "and I don't need that to be happy, but I wake up at 3 a.m. to hearing my grandma crying because she doesn't know if she'll have money to put milk in the fridge or bread on the table."

Amanda speaks these words on the very first tape she sends to us in February of this year. She is one of 11 New Orleans-area students, age 12 to 20, who received cameras from me and filmmaker Spike Lee in January. Their mission: Take the cameras and tell us the story of your post-Katrina lives.

For instance, Amanda tells us her grandmother, Dolores, has mentioned suicide. "All I could say was it's going to be OK, when in my heart I don't think it is." Dolores has raised Amanda since she was 11 years old. That was the year her mother died from cancer. Since returning to St. Bernard Parish, east of New Orleans, Dolores has tried to support the two of them while working at McDonald's.

In early spring, 15-year-old Deshawn Dabney confides to his camera, "I don't want to be dead at 15. I have dreams, a whole life to live. I want to be this huge entertainer... and there is no way I can do that if I'm dead." He has reason to be concerned. He is speaking just days after a neighbor, 17-year-old Anthony Placide, was killed by a gunshot wound to the head. The shooting happened only a few hundred feet from Deshawn's front door.

On another tape we get a few days later, Deshawn is interviewing Anthony's 14-year-old brother, Jamell Hurst. "I was shocked," Jamell tells Deshawn about his brother's murder.

By now, I'm a bit shocked too, by the emotions these kids are sharing on these tapes. Seventeen-year-old Shantia Reneau talks about her inability to afford the college of her dreams, Southeastern Louisiana University. All of the family's extra money is going toward rebuilding their damaged home in the 9th Ward. They're

living in a FEMA trailer in a parking lot. "I really want to go to Southeastern, but if not, I'll have to stay down here," she says while walking along her damaged street. "I didn't want to. New Orleans has nothing to offer, nothing, not a thing."

Nineteen-year-old Brandon Franklin is looking outside New Orleans, too. He wants to go away to college to study to become a band director. But it may be a tough road for him. He is raising a 1-year-old with his live-in girlfriend, Ivorionne, and they have another baby on the way. "I feel like we're a little bit too young for the responsibilities we have," he tells the camera in a strong, confident voice. "But I feel like I can do anything I put my mind to." Seeing and hearing him, you want to believe it.

Amanda, Deshawn, Shantia and Brandon are among the approximately 30,000 students who attend public schools in Orleans and St. Bernard Parish nearly two years after the storm, down from more than 75,000 before Katrina hit.

On the day we distributed the cameras, Spike Lee told the kids to "just go out and shoot, tape is cheap." With this cheap tape these kids have taught us all a powerful, infinitely valuable lesson that will stay with me forever.

To view the individual stories, visit

<http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/08/28/Soledat.childrenofstorm/index.html>