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## Katrina-displaced students make mark

University of New Orleans senior Christian Stevens is determined to get his college degree.

Never mind that his mother is fretting about his safety or that the New Orleans recovery effort is off to a wobbly start 12 weeks after Hurricane Katrina came ashore. Stevens won't hear it.

"If I have to walk around New Orleans with a toxic mask on for four months, I'll do it," said Stevens, who studied at Temple as a visiting student this semester after his senior year was interrupted by Katrina. "Whatever it takes. I'm too close to stop now."

Stevens, a business major, stands 18 credits short of his diploma. He has already registered online for his spring semester at UNO and will leave Philadelphia, where his family has taken up temporary residence, for New Orleans in January.

Even so, Stevens will encounter major obstacles when he returns to his home city. For one, he's not sure where he'll stay, as his family's New Orleans East house is uninhabitable because of extensive damage from the hurricane. Much of the city remains without power, and reports of looting persist.

"I'm kind of nervous about going back to New Orleans," he said. "There are a number of unpredictable situations. I just hope that those students who do go back won't be alone and having to face these struggles on their own."

According to an estimate by the National Student Clearinghouse, an organization that provides academic reporting and verification services to nearly 3,000 higher education institutions, more than 18,000 college students were forced to flee the Gulf Coast region after Katrina.

Of those 18,000 students, 43 came to at Temple after the University offered students an immediate opportunity to take classes as soon as the scope of the storm's damage became apparent on Sept. 1. These visiting students temporarily enrolled here, at no charge, while continuing to pay tuition and fees to their home institutions.

Like Stevens, a fair number of these students displaced by the storm — at Temple and nationwide — will wend back to the Gulf Coast region beginning next semester. Two such students from Temple are Stephanie and Tiffany Curtis, sophomore identical twins from Southwest Philadelphia who harbor strong allegiances to their home institution, Xavier University of Louisiana, a small, historically black university in New Orleans.

"We are committed to Xavier and the memories we've made down there," said Tiffany, who, with her sister, took classes part-time at Temple this fall. "We want to keep supporting them in every way we can."

At Xavier, in order for the university to regain a normal academic cycle, January will mark the



*Christian Stevens, a senior business major who came to Temple after Hurricane Katrina shut down his University of New Orleans campus in September, plans to return to Louisiana next semester. However, Stevens — shown above at the Baptist Temple, his favorite building on campus — has already forged bonds here that he hopes will bring him back to Temple before long.*

beginning of its fall 2005 semester. Students will take a week break in late April and then immediately start the spring 2006 semester, leaving them only a month of summer vacation. "I'm looking forward to going back and jumping into a full course load," said Stephanie who, ironically, had Temple on her list of schools before she and her sister chose Xavier.

If there were any worries that the visiting students who enrolled at Temple would stick out as "the Katrina kids," those qualms have been quieted by their seamless transition into campus life.

Many of them sought opportunities to be active on campus, even if they knew that their studies at Temple would be short-lived. Stevens started the Gulf Coast Club, an organization for affected students. Both Curtis sisters got jobs on campus at Student Health Services. Peter Seltzer, a sophomore business major at UNO, works for Student Activities.

Likewise, the Temple community has embraced them. Administrators, faculty, staff and students raised more than \$10,000 for a special fund to ease the financial burden of displaced students. Chi Upsilon Sigma, a Temple sorority, hosted a Thanksgiving dinner on Nov. 20 for students displaced by Katrina. The University's chapter of Golden Key, an international academic honors organization, feted a handful of the visiting students to recognize their dedication to classes and service throughout the tumultuous semester. Tuttleman Counseling Services offered coping tips to the affected students and brought them together to talk about their experiences.

"Coming to Temple this semester, it couldn't have been a better situation for me after what I had been through," Stevens said. "The community is large enough that I didn't feel overwhelmed by people asking about me, but at the same time it is close-knit enough that I didn't have to beg for help when I needed it. Many of the students like me who will be returning to New Orleans next semester say in the same breath that they will miss Temple."

Not all the Katrina survivors are going back to their home institutions, however. Seltzer, a New Orleans native, has decided to transfer to Temple.

"UNO is a wonderful place, but I'm kind of settled here now," Seltzer said. "No matter what happens, though, New Orleans will always be my home."

Political science major Whitney Duesman will return to Tulane University — but only for her graduation. This fall was her final semester of college. As a Tulane Honors student, she must complete a senior thesis before graduation.

"It's been challenging because I still have to keep in touch with advisers at Tulane and they're in such a state of flux right now," said Duesman, whose thesis is about religious groups and their contributions to political coalitions.

"I'm very fortunate because I got connected at Temple with Dr. [Christopher] Wlezien, who is doing a really good job of assisting me," she added. "I feel bad because he's already so busy. It's like he's taken me on pro bono."

Duesman plans to work on the rebuilding effort with a Habitat for Humanity team in January and then apply for jobs in Washington, D.C., as a political analyst.

Like Duesman, Stevens is nearing the end of his college career, an endeavor that started five years ago at Florida A&M University and has been derailed on numerous occasions by medical emergencies, financial aid mishaps and, most recently, Katrina. Though Stevens returns to UNO in January for his final semester, he has a feeling that he's not finished with Temple.

"I just hope that this is not my last time on the Temple campus," Stevens said. "I think that this semester was just the beginning of many memories I'll have of this place. Hopefully, I'll again be walking the halls of The Fox School when I go for my M.B.A."

- By Ted Boscia and Karen Shuey