

FACES OF POVERTY: MARSHALL MARKT

The wanderer: Auburn senior, Hurricane Katrina survivor, describes descent into 'abyss'



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An act of God was the beginning of the end for Marshall Markt.

Now an Auburn resident, Marshall's transition to a fixed-income senior citizen living in poverty began in another part of the country. It was August 2005. He was 63 years old.

Markt was playing the waiting game in a hotel in Lafayette, Louisiana as per an emergency evacuation order. This was his life for several weeks. The weather, he recalls, was nice at points.

His home in Marrero, a small community just south of New Orleans across the Mississippi River, was about 150 miles away from him to the east. Markt remembers waiting in his hotel room with no idea of what exactly he would return home to.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana on Aug. 29, 2005. Markt remembers the date well. He should: Life for Markt was never the same afterward.

It was one of the most catastrophic natural disasters in the history of the nation. Katrina took more than 1,800 lives and shattered countless others, including Markt's.

When Markt returned to his Marrero home weeks later, he said the damage to his house was actually not very extensive. The high winds tore away roof shingles and his possessions were soaked from the caustic rainfalls, but his home was otherwise habitable.

His community, on the other hand, was not.

He lost his job. The delivery service he worked for on a part-time basis was under water. Beyond that, everyone in the area struggled to find food and fuel with many local establishments closed down, he said. Markt was fortunate enough for his home to have electrical power; others did not.

The storm "was the straw that broke the camel's back," Marshall said. Prior to Katrina, Marshall had considered moving to an area with a better housing market. He targeted central New York as a destination spot, and Katrina pushed him to commit.

Moving from place to place was second-nature for Marshall. He regularly bought homes and then sold them for profits. But Katrina, he said, swept away any records of property ownership for a lot of people, Marshall included. He couldn't sell his home.

So he left. His destination? Auburn, New York.

In June 2006, Marshall moved to the city with limited assets and not too much going for him. He was a "Katrina refugee" with only a high school education and 64 years of life under his belt.

He scoffs at the thought: With 20-somethings struggling to get jobs, how could a 64-year-old without a college degree hope to find employment?

"It just doesn't lend to doing a whole lot," he said of his circumstances.

Just like that, Marshall went from freedom to a fixed income. For eight years, he has lived on \$1,333 a month through Social Security and \$16 a month through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. He lives alone if you don't count the several dogs he cares for.

Marshall considers his family gone from his life. His wife of 38 years passed away two years ago. He was never close with his daughter, who would now be around 46 years old.

He's now 72. He'll be 73 later this year.

He struggles. Marshall swallows his pride on regular occasions, going to pantries for food that typically borders on expired.

He has to make the tough choices, saying "you're put in a position where you have to watch every cent you spend."

He hates it. He hates it because it wasn't always this way.

Wanderlust

Before Katrina, struggle was foreign to Marshall's life.

He always lived life on his own terms. Even his childhood, he said, was "very pleasant."

His education continued as far as high school. "You didn't need to go farther than that back then," Marshall said. And soon after completing school, Marshall was on the move.

Since he was a teenager, Marshall has never been one to stick around in one place, he said. He was born in Boston, but has lived in Florida, Texas, California — just about everywhere, he said, except the North and Midwest. The states were his stomping grounds back then.

He was involved the trucking industry for 15 years or so, working on the administrative side of the business. The longest he worked in one place was in Boston, and that lasted about five years. Employment never lasted a year at other places, but he said he always gave his

employers 110 percent.

"I traveled so much because I was really interested in how people lived in all of those places," he said before joking, "I guess I found out, right?"

Marshall is not close with some of his immediate family members whether by circumstance or by choice. Marshall was born to a 16-year-old teenage girl and was given up for adoption without a name.

She and Marshall remained "acquaintances" until she died due to complications related to alcoholism at 36. He never met his biological father.

His adoptive family eventually named him Marshall, but they are all gone from his life as well, he said.

He and his wife lived a very loose relationship, Marshall described it. They were friends, but they never lived together: Marshall was always on the road while she stayed stable and raised their daughter. They liked each other, sure, but they never loved each other — at least, according to Marshall. "Things were different back then," Marshall said.

His varied travels eventually brought him to Louisiana in 2002. He moved in from Florida after selling his home for a considerable profit. The Louisiana property, he remembers, came at a very favorable price.

He had gone to New Orleans several times throughout his life, starting in the 1970s, and Marrero was not very far.

"If you like to party and you like good food, New Orleans is a place to be," he said.

But times were changing. An economy that was favorable to Marshall's lifestyle was changing into a different, unkindly animal. And naturally, Marshall was getting older. His body was not as kind to him as it was in his prime as a wanderer.

Regardless, Marshall took to Marrero and worked part-time. He soon found that his living situation was not as favorable as it once was. His utilities bills were as high as his mortgage payments, for example. It was time to go.

Like he had so many times in the past, Marshall planned on leaving his home for a place with a better housing market. Among his targeted landing spots were central New York, Pennsylvania and other Northeast areas.

"And then Katrina whacked me."

Homesick

It's now 2014. Marshall takes a deep breath, furrows his brow and leans forward. He then describes his rock bottom.

When moving to Auburn, Marshall had very little money to work with. He had \$65,000 in the bank, but spent \$52,500 on his house and much of the rest on a car and other necessities. He did receive an approximately \$13,000 loan from the federal Small Business Administration

following Katrina, but that would only serve to haunt him down the road.

He couldn't sell his property in Marerro and he didn't have any familial support to lean on. Jobless, Marshall had no other choice but to take out a reverse mortgage in 2010. Two years later, he filed for bankruptcy when he couldn't repay the \$13,000 loan and the treasury department, he said, threatened to cut his Social Security by 20 percent.

He struggles to pay his living costs with the \$1,333 monthly allowance. A 20-percent reduction? Unacceptable.

"You can buy a home cheap, but everything else will nail you to the wall," he said.

Marshall's life now revolves around taking care of himself and his dogs. He's alive, but not really living, he said. Marshall watches TV, goes on the computer, and takes care of his pets. "What the hell do people do in their 70s anyways?" he wonders.

"I like to do a lot of things, but there isn't a hell of a whole lot I can do because everything costs money," he said. "I can't afford to spend money I don't have."

He certainly doesn't like being anchored down in one place. However, life in a small two-story home "in the armpit" of Auburn is much better than life in Marerro post-Katrina, he believes.

"Getting the hell out of Louisiana is enough," he said, before describing the paranoia, violence and crime that ran rampant throughout the post-storm community. "It was a living nightmare."

With his growing age, the light at the end of the tunnel is nearing for Marshall, but he hasn't given up on life yet. He's eager to turn his fortunes around and get out of Auburn when he can, dreaming of a life in a mobile home in Boston.

Wanderlust still thrives in Marshall's heart, and he hates the hope that comes with the misfortune — whether that's hoping he'll win the lottery or hoping that his car will keep chugging along year after year.

"I would rather be on the move than standing still," he said. "I don't hope. I will. I don't like being stuck here. I don't like being stuck in one place. And if I have to spend my remaining life in a motor home, I'll be perfectly fine with that."

Marshall is not suffering from any major health issues, but he's certainly a lot older, he said, than a lot of the people he sees at the local food pantries.

Years ago, the world was Marshall's oyster. Now every time he wanders into a food pantry, he's reminded that that world he lived in is now gone. "The worm certainly turned," he joked.

But at least he had a chance to live, he said.

"If I compare myself to 99 percent of the people at the food pantry, they're worse off than I am," he said. "I doubt they've done what I've done in my life."

"And they're young. These people are stuck at a very young age," he said. "They're looking forward to the abyss. My abyss?"

He jerks his thumb over his shoulder, motioning behind him.

"My abyss is behind me."

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