Reprinted with permission.

Lifestyles, Page 1E
Sept. 9, 2012

UW-Stout student follows positive path after storm

By UW-Stout News Bureau

MENOMONIE — As thousands of Gulf Coast residents nervously watched Hurricane Isaac's approach recently, one UW-Stout student knew what it was like to be in their shoes.

Isaac spun into the southern Louisiana coast Aug. 28, sending floodwaters surging and unleashing fierce winds, then passed slightly west of New Orleans Aug. 29 - seven years after Hurricane Katrina devastated Louisiana and Mississippi.

The whole scenario sounded eerily familiar to Troy Nelson. Seven years ago Nelson and his family listened to weather forecasts and wondered what to do as Hurricane Katrina, a much larger storm than Isaac, approached on the same path.

The family lived in Pass Christian, Miss., a few hundred yards from the coast. Katrina roared ashore Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, in Pass Christian with 125 mph winds and a storm surge nearly 28 feet high. The hurricane took with it 8,000 structures - the vast majority in the city, including the Nelsons' home.

Officially, Katrina was a category 3 hurricane when it hit. Figuratively, it was many times stronger. It washed Nelson and his family about 1,000 miles inland, all the way to Wisconsin.
Katrina is the reason Nelson, a Gulf Coast kid, ended up going to college in west-central Wisconsin. It also taught him some valuable life lessons: Move forward, make the most of life's opportunities, and don't get too attached to things.

"A house is where you put your stuff. A home is where your family is. Stuff can be replaced," Nelson said.

A senior, he is incoming president of the Stout Student Association, the governing body for students, and reigning homecoming king. Majoring in hotel, restaurant and tourism management, he is excited about the year ahead, which began with classes Wednesday, and about his future.

"I love UW-Stout so much I don't want to leave," he said. He described Menomonie as "awesome because it has everything you need within walking distance."

Nelson's turbid past, however, never is far from his thoughts. He, his parents and his brother were some of the lucky ones in 2005 - they survived.

When the Aug. 26, 2005, school week ended at Pass Christian High School in Pass Christian, Miss., Nelson, a freshman, was excited about the possibility of a long weekend. Katrina was approaching in the Gulf of Mexico, a teacher told his class, meaning school could be canceled that coming Monday.

Nelson didn't worry much about the storm. People in Pass Christian, a city of 4,600 between Biloxi, Miss., and New Orleans, had ridden out tropical storms and minor hurricanes many times before.

This storm would be different. Nelson never saw his teachers or classmates again.

"My dad woke me up Sunday morning and said, 'Pack your bags. We've got to get out of here,' " Nelson said.

Katrina was headed straight for the Nelsons. They left hurriedly, joining thousands of other people on the clogged freeways and leaving behind many personal belongings because they thought they'd be back in a few days.

Nelson took a video of his family leaving home, as well as video throughout their ordeal. Some of his video wound up on Fox News on national television.
The Nelsons went to a storm shelter about 25 miles north of Pass Christian. After a few days there, they realized it was a worst-case scenario. "An aunt said she saw our neighborhood on Fox News and not a building was standing," Nelson said.

When they realized their home, neighborhood, workplaces, schools and city were in ruins, they had no other choice but to find another place to live.

They headed north to Wisconsin to stay with Nelson's grandparents in Beloit. Nelson and his father, Rick, made one trip back to Pass Christian - two weeks after the storm - to salvage what they could.

"That's when it hit me," Troy said, referring to when he saw the destruction.

The Nelsons' neighborhood was so flattened that at first they didn't recognize their home site. Nelson and his brother had a small fishing boat; it was found in a tree. Another larger family boat was found on railroad tracks a half-mile away.

Nelson found a fishing reel, some broken pieces of family china and a few such things in the mud but little else.

"It was martial law down there, soldiers with guns. Razor wire was blocking off the neighborhood. It smelled awful," he said.

Government help was slow to arrive.

"They forgot about people like us. All the aid went to New Orleans," Nelson said.

Nelson's parents found jobs in Baraboo, and Nelson enrolled in high school there.

He worked for several summers in nearby Wisconsin Dells at Kalahari Resorts and Convention Center, where he heard about UW-Stout's hotel, restaurant and tourism program from several of the university's students working there.

In his sophomore year at UW-Stout he became involved with the Stout Student Association and other campus groups.

"I just kept building on that. I strive to be active, get involved and do the best I can at everything I try," Nelson said.
Some of his immediate SSA goals are to rebuild the organization's website; involve more students; help the campus become more sustainable; get a large student vote out in the presidential election; and emphasize compliance with the tobacco-free campus policy.

Joan Thomas, UW-Stout dean of students, said Nelson is serious about his responsibilities and is eager to learn more about how the campus operates.

"Troy has established himself as a student leader, having been involved in SSA for the past two years and taking on increasing leadership responsibilities. This year as president, he has worked hard all summer to lay a foundation for a productive year with a strong emphasis in getting students out to vote in the upcoming election," Thomas said.

The Gulf Coast of Mississippi still is home to Nelson. He would love to return there someday to live, he said, and maybe rebuild on his family's home site.

If he did so, the house would look a little different. New rules require that the house would have to be 15 feet off the ground, he said, to help prevent another disaster as big as Katrina.