

TRANSADVOCATE

A New Orleans Trans Evacuee's Story

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Abstract

Many people in the wake of Katrina's devastating landfall in the New Orleans area were evacuated to Houston and other places in the metro area. New Orleans also has a large cluster of transpeople who were also affected by 80% of the city being flooded in various ways. Some of them found themselves transported [...]

Article



Many people in the wake of Katrina's devastating landfall in the New Orleans area were evacuated to Houston and other places in the metro area.

New Orleans also has a large cluster of transpeople who were also affected by 80% of the city being flooded in various ways. Some of them found themselves transported out of the city as evacuees and spending time here in the Houston metro area.

One of those evacuees was then 20 year old Sharli'e Dominique Vicks, who was working as a substitute teacher when she began her transition in January of 2005.

Sharli'e's story begins after the levees failed and she and her two cousins sought higher ground than their downtown neighborhood. One of the cousins was 18 year old cis female Rolanda Grisham, and

Rolanda's 16 year old sibling was a trans female in the early stages of transition .

In Sharli'e's case, because she's 5' 7'', was taking hormones and was a little further along the feminine body development path in her transition she blended in a bit easier than her slender 6 foot tall trans cousin.



Over the next five days Sharli'e and her cousins found themselves navigating a real life edition of Survivor: New Orleans.

They walked and swam 1.5 miles to the New Orleans Convention Center where they spent two harrowing and uncomfortable nights there before leaving it and spending two hot, uncomfortable and hungry days on an I-10 overpass.

She and the Grisham siblings finally made it to the Superdome, where they received help and a bus ride to Houston enroute to the shelter that had been set up in the Astrodome.

When the bus arrived at the Dome a few hours later it was turned away and redirected to College Station and Texas A&M University northwest of the city. A shelter had been set up at Reed Arena on the A&M campus and after the bus spent another two hours in transit to Aggieland from the Astrodome area Sharli'e and her cousins arrived there at 1 AM on September 3.



The shelter was under the command of then A&M Corps of Cadets commander John Van Alostine and

after Sharli'e talked to a volunteer about her and her cousin's trans status, she expressed her desire to take a shower. She also expressed her fear about showering with men for obvious reasons.

The volunteer didn't have a problem with it since the shower facility set up for women in the Reed Arena shelter was curtained off. It was the early morning and she and her trans cousin did so with no problem.

They also took two more showers in the women's facility without incident. But somebody had a problem with Sharli'e and her trans cousin using the female showers and reported it to John Van Alostine, who warned them not to use the shower again.

Sharli'e and her cousin after being inoculated against diseases and hearing the briefing about what they had swam and waded through, wanted to take another shower. But with Van Alostine's warning reverberating in their heads and fearing what would happen if she used the men's shower, got permission to do so from a shelter volunteer before heading back to the facility again.

After emerging from it, they were arrested on Sept 4 by Texas A&M campus police on criminal trespass charges. The trans cousin of Sharli'e was hauled off to a juvenile facility and later released to the custody of her sister Rolanda, but Sharli'e found herself being hustled off to the Brazos County Jail under a \$6000 bond for taking a damned shower.



Sharli'e spent a stressful four days locked up there until Bryan-College Station Eagle reporter Laura Hensley stumbled across her case while researching another one. She got in contact with Sharli'e, interviewed her at the Brazos County Jail, published her story in the Eagle and then the fun began.

The story got national attention, outraged national TBLG groups and a certain Aggie alum and Houston trans attorney named Phyllis Frye. She was also in the Corps of Cadets during her time on the A&M campus. She was hired to represent Sharli'e and was about to train her legal sights on Brazos County when then prosecutor Jim Kuboviak declined to press charges in the case..

As Phyllis said in a Houston Chronicle interview about Sharli'e plight, ""Six thousand dollars is a hell of a big bond for criminal trespass with no allegation of violence," she said. "I mean, she had to to shower someplace."

Bryan resident Claudette Peterson, who has years of experience working with TBLG people was moved by the story and picked up Sharli'e from the Brazos County Jail. She took Sharli'e to her home for the evening and during their long conversations she broke it down about her trans issues and informed Sharli'e about the organizations that could help her.



The Houston TBLG community was getting mobilized as well after hearing about Sharli'e's case and another Houston suburban shelter incident involving a trans evacuee who had been harassed at a Conroe shelter.

They discovered that Sharli'e's mother Djuana was at the shelter set up in the George R. Brown Convention center, and the Montrose Counseling Center booked two rooms at the swank Hilton Americas Hotel next to the George R Brown for mother and trans daughter.

The Chronicle story ends with Sharli'e, her mom, sister Antoinette, niece and cousins considering a move to Houston.

As of now don't know if the story ended that way or they eventually moved back to New Orleans like some of the evacuees who were evacuated here but missed the Big Easy did.

What Sharli'e situation did do was galvanize us in the Houston trans community to set up every hurricane season a Transgender Foundation of America maintained list of people in this community who would be willing to take in trans evacuees.

Whatever happened, do hope life got better for Sharli'e, her cousins and her family. I also don't ever want to hear or write about ever again a transperson spending five days in jail because some transphobic idiot had a problem with then taking a shower in an emergency shelter.

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