

Better the second time around

Assistant InsideOut editor Stephanie Stokes and her husband, Managing Editor/News Dan Shea, have lived in their Old Metairie comeback since 1998. The raised house was spared in the May 1995 flood, but was caught in the waters from the Orleans levee breaches after Katrina. They moved in upstairs, and the FEMA trailer out front, after Christmas 2005.

It was tempting to just tear down the soggy, moldy mess of our house and start over. Instead, we decided to rebuild — but rebuild better, investing in the house and in our neighborhood.

Our 1940s-era cottage with a deep front porch had already gone through at least two renovations, which added rooms in the rear and a camelback. Our Realtor called it “a family house” — a kind way of saying “roomy but nothing fancy.”

Sixteen inches of water meant we were on our way to renovation No. 3, a complete gutting and redo of the 2,000-square-foot first floor, even though the final cost would go beyond our modest insurance settlement. We hired architect/designer Volume Zero, the patient and creative husband/wife team of Michael Cajski and Van Tran, to help us to re-envision our patched-together floor

plan. And we were blessed with equally skilled and responsive contractors, Eddie Giddens Inc. of Shreveport.

A mishmash of smaller rooms has given way to spaces designed around how we live. The grander kitchen, French-windowed dining room and patio are all next to one another, instead of rooms apart. The office, which had been in a too-sunny, too-hot room in the rear too close to the master bedroom, is now in a cozy “study” that can be isolated from the noisy, kid-centered rest of the house.

A new partition wall creates, on one side, a center hall that lends formality to the entrance and, on the other, a wide space in the great room against which to put the new flat-screen TV. The great room itself was carved out of the old kitchen, a too-small breakfast room and a little-used front parlor. The floors and trim are now consistent throughout the first floor. And, resolving one of my pet peeves, the laundry room is now no longer anywhere near the TV!

We reclaimed our downstairs Aug. 19, 2006. We're not the first people to describe their post-Katrina renovation as making lemonade out of a big, bitter lemon — and I hope we won't be the last.

—STEPHANIE STOKES /sstokes@timespicayune.com

Flooded or not, we're all survivors

InsideOut transfers editor Stephanie Stroud lived in a duplex that didn't flood, quite. But, as with all of us, the storm affected her life nevertheless.

was one of the lucky ones, unless “survivor guilt” somehow makes me unfortunate. Let's count the ways:

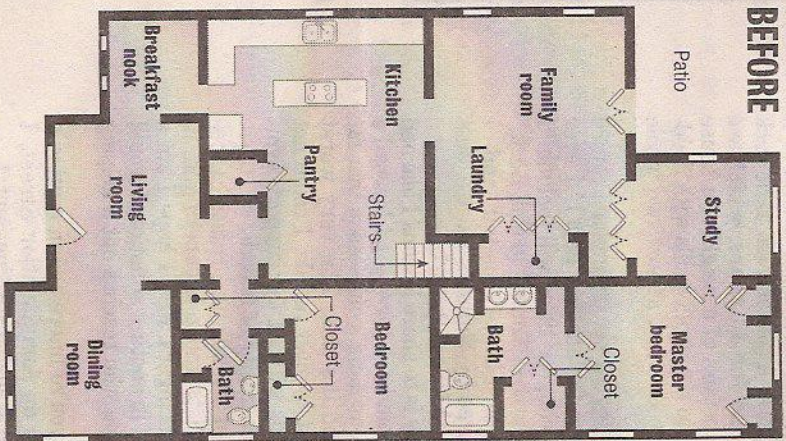
I lived in a rented duplex on a block of Iberville Street where every other house took on water, but it only lapped at my front porch.

I had foolishly let my renter's insurance lapse just months before the August 2005 storm, but it didn't matter because

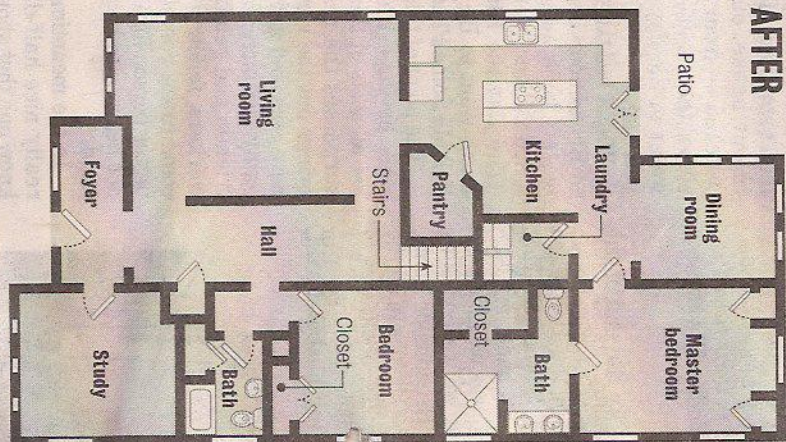
somehow was left unlocked and ajar for who knows how long, no burglars took advantage of the situation. My brand new Nikes still sat on the living room floor. And everything else — all in clear view through the front door, where the curtain had been torn by rescuers trying to determine whether any person or animal was inside — was left untouched.

I had recently reduced the insurance on my car because it was nearly 10 years old, but I was ready to buy a new one anyway. And on a sunny day in October 2005, as my mother and I packed my lucky belongings into the bed of her pickup truck

BEFORE



AFTER



A complete downstairs gutting led the way to a revamped floor plan and more family-friendly living space for Stephanie Stokes and Dan Shea.

Source: Staff research

STAFF GRAPHIC BY ENNETT MAYER III

1997 Honda Civic in my driveway. I don't know if he ever got the smell of rotten cat food out of it.

After six weeks with my parents — all the while getting a paycheck — my employer had my workplace back in order. My neighborhood, however, was deserted and in ruins, so living in my old apartment was not an option. Besides, the roof leaked and the kitchen floor had buckled, from water that had seeped through floorboards in the back of the house.

A friend let me live with him for a year, rent-free (I helped pay the utilities). He made space for my furniture and piles of stuff, not to mention my two Chihuahuas. And he never complained.

As a displaced Katrina victim, I also

been living since November. It's a small condo, but it's mine (or will be in about 30 years), and it's on the second story, high above the 6 inches of water that flooded the Parkview street I now call home.

Because I've been so lucky, I've felt an obligation to help those who weren't. In Lakeview, Gentilly and eastern New Orleans, I've cleared out wet, muddy belongings from houses, gutted others to the studs, put in insulation, you name it.

It has helped me face my survivor guilt and made me realize that I, too, live with this storm day after day. It has helped me remain devoted to the city I've called home for 10 years — and made me more determined than ever to stay here and help make sure we recover.