



Surviving Hurricane Katrina

Jennifer Gillis, an experienced horsewoman from Gulfport, Miss., recounts in this open letter to her fellow International Andalusian Lusitano Horse Association (IALHA) members how she and her family--horses included--managed to survive the most devastating natural disaster to strike this country.

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On a cool morning in October of 2004, I, Jennifer Gillis, waited outside my barn in Anaheim, California, to leave for the IALHA Nationals and to leave the home I knew in sunny Laguna Hills for the past ten years. I scheduled our move to Gulfport, Mississippi, so I could hit Nationals on my way and go straight to our beautiful 25 acre farm we purchased that summer. Nationals was wonderful, and we left Ft. Worth heading for the promised land. When my husband, my horse CCRS Mariscal, and our two Jack Russell Terriers arrived, I knew I was in heaven. It was gorgeous; exactly what we had wanted. Things only got better when we found that we would be expecting our first baby in the summer of 2005. I put our plans of purchasing several mares and setting up our breeding facility on hold. Little did I know for how long.

Just a couple weeks after our baby girl, Jillian Lea, arrived I was back in the saddle making plans for the future of our farm "La Quinta." A dark storm was brewing in the Tropics, her name was Katrina; that was not in the plan. We watched as it made its way into the Gulf of Mexico, gaining power. The preparations started days in advance; boarding up the house, checking the barn roof, gathering supplies. My best friend Suzy was in town enjoying our new addition and the fact she had just sent a yearling to our farm to grow up. On August 27, when she was due to fly back to CA she refused to leave with the storm heading our way; so she stayed. I refused to leave because we did not have ample transportation to move the four horses on our property out of harm's way. We ignored the evacuation call. After all how bad could a hurricane really be? Everything was secure Sunday, August 28th, the night before the longest day we have ever gone through in our lives.

Four a.m. Monday, August 29th, I awoke on the floor of my baby's room. The power was out. The wind was already howling and conditions deteriorating. I made a last call to my Mom and Dad to say I loved them and we would be fine. Our



*Top: The Gillis' La Quinta farm, Gulfport, Mississippi
Bottom: Jennifer Gillis and CCRS Mariscal*



house was strong, the barn was strong, and above all we were strong. They did not have the heart to worry us and tell us the massive 300 mile wide storm had shifted and the eye would hit us. Suzy and I braved the already 75mph+ winds, went to the barn, checked the horses, made sure everything was OK and made a quick retreat back to the main house. Around eight am, my husband Todd and Suzy disappeared into the back of the house. They came into the nursery and said we had to leave; we were losing the house. As the dining room windows were sucking in like pieces of plastic,



I stood at the door with my baby and looked toward the barn. Panic gripped me when I realized I was going to have to make a run, with the baby, into the now 150mph+ winds and my God, we were losing the barn with the horses in it. Pieces of the roof were flying off like paper in the wind. My heart sank. I made it to our guest house with tears rolling down my face. Todd and Suzy were still in the main house trying to move furniture and possessions from the caving in roof. All I wanted was everyone together. After what seemed like hours, they had gathered and saved what they could and we all "hunkered" down for the worst of the storm. I could barely make out the corner of the barn, but I sat and watched as pieces of metal and wood flew from that direction. The baby slept, we did not talk, just listened to the destruction all around us. Around eleven a.m., the winds lessened; the eye was near. In a mad dash we made our way to the barn. Our equine friends were calm and nickering for lunch; we threw flakes of hay, said our I love you's and left them for a second time with tears in our eyes. "Please GOD watch over them," I prayed over and over. The worst was yet to come,



Photos this page: Before and after photos of the Gillis' farm in Gulfport, Mississippi in August/September 2005.



but none of us knew.

When a hurricane passes, the winds shift and you get hit from the other direction, usually then the tornadoes come. We believe at least three, if not more hit our farm. Out-barns were thrown a hundred yards, the battered trees fell, the barn roof was peeled back and flung away. I closed my eyes and just knew anything outside would not survive, even our horses. The next four hours were what I would suppose Hell is like. Not knowing, praying for our animals and our friends; it was the longest afternoon in my life.

Shortly after four p.m. we made our way out into the mess. Our paddock gates had been thrown into a large pecan tree



that had fallen on the roof of our guest house, we had to climb fence and tree to get into the barn. I was happy to see Mariscal was highly offended. If he could talk, I imagine he would have said, "The ground shaking for a minute or so would have been bad enough, but I'm really mad; I'm wet and dirty and I have a clear view of the Southern sky from my house...and where is my dinner MOM!!!!" All of our horses made it. They were alive, not a scratch on them and amazingly calm. One barn door had blown off; the other imploded inward and was blocking two stall doors. Everything was soaked and covered in shredded leaves. I sat in the paddock and cried; it looked as if a bomb was dropped on our little piece of heaven...and I had not even seen the house yet.

We were the lucky ones. We did not have the 30ft+ tidal surge that claimed the beautiful, antebellum Old South Coast. There you only find slabs of where homes used to stand. Our town was gone; completely wiped off the map. We have friends who lost their entire lives they once knew. Several farms in our area lost all of their livestock; one barn lost 20 horses. We were so lucky. We were alive, our animals were alive, we had a partial home and an intact guest house; a place to start over. And that we are doing, it is just going to be a long road.

I wish to thank, from the bottom of my heart, all who have donated to the IALHA relief fund, and Jacqueline O'Rourke-Hall for heading this committee. Until you have been through something like this, you do not realize how much every little bit can help to strengthen and rebuild lives torn apart. The idea alone that people care and are willing to help can light a fire in faith that is growing dark. It is so appreciated that the board choose to give my family a piece of the goodness that so many put forth. Thank you all so very much.

In a perfect world, I wish no one to have to call on IALHA for relief funds, but contributing time and donations to this committee is so very important, because in the event you would have to call on our wonderful organization for help, it will warm your heart to know it's there and people care. Almost a year after, we are doing well enough, the horses have a roof over their heads...although it's not the new roof yet, it leaks a bit. Our fencing is up, we are not in our home yet, but the guest house is nice, kind of like our condo in CA! But we are on the road to recovery, every day is looking brighter and hopefully by 2007 our Jillian will be at Nationals doing the leadline class! Thank you, so very much! ~ Jennifer Gillis

Photos this page:

Top: The roof of the barn was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and at least 3 tornados. Four horses were inside during the storm. All emerged unscathed.

Bottom: the Gillis family