

A healing place after Katrina

Couple offered trip anywhere; they pick Niagara Falls

By Bill Michelmore - NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU

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Niagara Falls is a healing place for Sharon and David Gauthé.

The Louisiana couple volunteered nearly two years of their time, helping with relief and recovery efforts following Hurricane Katrina.

Now they're on a different kind of R & R.

The Gauthés were offered an all-expenses paid vacation to anywhere in the world for much needed rest and recreation. They chose Niagara Falls.

Or perhaps Niagara Falls chose them.

While they were still deciding where to go, David Gauthé was clearing out a house that had been devastated by the hurricane.

The only object to survive was a souvenir plate of Niagara Falls.

"We're religious people," Sharon Gauthé said. "We took that as a sign."

This is the first visit to Niagara Falls for the couple, who are in their late 50s and have been married 37 years. They have three children and 13 foster children.

They flew from New Orleans on Wednesday evening and are staying in Niagara Falls, Ont., hotel until Sunday. "We're having a wonderful

time," Sharon Gauthé said. "People here are amazing. They keep giving us things."

Such as lunch Thursday at the Anchor Bar, the famous Buffalo restaurant that needs no introduction — except to the Gauthés.

"We have some excellent restaurants in New Orleans, but the Anchor Bar was a new experience for us," said David Gauthé, a life insurance executive.

They had Buffalo wings and beef on weck, and their money was no good to Ivano Toscani, the general manager.

“This was their first time in Buffalo,” Toscani said. “The lunch was on us.”

The Gauthes said they were particularly impressed by the architecture of many of the downtown buildings.

“The old architecture made me feel I was in London or somewhere,” Sharon Gauthé said.

Architecture is something they lost a lot of during Katrina’s onslaught Aug. 29, 2005.

“We lost many famous mansions,” David Gauthé said. “Altogether, we lost 200 square miles in three days — the equivalent of one football field every 36 minutes.”

They know by heart the statistics of the nation’s most costly natural disaster: More than 1,600 people killed; 1 million people homeless; 200,000 Gulf Coast homes destroyed; 80 percent of New Orleans under water; more than \$25 billion in property damage.

Sharon Gauthé, executive director of Bayou Interfaith Shared Community Organizing , was one of 17 community organizers awarded vacations by the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation.

Bayou Interfaith members drove people to rescue shelters immediately after the hurricane, delivered food to those who wouldn’t leave their homes in the weeks and months that followed, and have helped clean up and rebuild houses since.

After deciding on Niagara Falls, Sharon Gauthé went online and found a Grand Island travel firm, Car-Go Audio Tours. She e-mailed company partner Sandra Wolgast, who made the arrangements.

Stops in Niagara Falls have included visits to both sides of the falls, as well as Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Luck was on their side from the start of their trip. Driving in from the Buffalo Niagara International Airport, they made a quick stop at the Seneca Niagara Casino. Sharon Gauthé played the penny slots and won \$900 right off the bat.

Unlike thousands of other residents, they also were lucky during Katrina.

Trees were blown down around their home in Thibodaux, La., about an hour’s drive from New Orleans, but their house was not damaged. The devastation is all around them.

“If you drive from the middle of Louisiana to the Gulf Coast, you still see destruction everywhere,” David Gauthé said.

“Many people don’t realize,” his wife added, “that more than 18 months after the hurricane, it

still looks the same. Nothing has changed.”

David Gauthe is currently working on a program to communicate the strength of incoming hurricanes to residents of the New Orleans area by taping strips of plastic around telephone poles at different heights. The higher the strip, the more deadly the category.

This year’s hurricane season is due to begin June 1 and residents are still recovering from Katrina and Hurricane Rita which hit three weeks later.

“We’re not ready,” David Gauthe said. “The city is still waiting for federal money. Many people are still homeless, living in shelters or their cars. Trailers [provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency] sit empty, and even if you get a trailer, you don’t get the key for six months.”

The Gauthes brought with them photographs showing the destruction in New Orleans and along the Gulf of Mexico.

“We’re having a good time up here,” David Gauthe said, “but we’re also getting the word out about Katrina and the lack of government help.”

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