

3 months and 3 days

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TARBORO -- There's not much in this white-walled living room to remind the Pohlmans of Christmases past. The slight, silky tree in the corner is new, a gift from their church. The few red balls dangling from it came unannounced a week before, when someone from another church dropped off a box of Christmas treats. But in a moment, all of that will change. In the center of this room sit half-a-dozen of the most beautiful battered cardboard boxes this family has ever seen.

They are filled with treasures: Postcard-size plaques, passed down from Sarah Pohlman's grandmother, to a cousin, to her. A hand-knit stocking made for her husband, Tom, when he was a child. An ornament that their daughter Kathryn glued together at church when she was 3. Altogether, generations of memories.

On this sunny Saturday in December, three months after the flood from Hurricane Floyd destroyed nearly everything in the Pohlman home, the idea that the family still has these simple, cherished keepsakes is nearly inconceivable.

So they gasp as they break into the boxes. "Oh, look!" says Kathryn, 10, pulling out a fishing boat ornament - her gift to her father last year.

The triggered reminiscences flow. "Your Uncle John painted that horse by hand," Sarah recalls as her daughter picks up another decoration.

They are relieved that Tom is tall, and that last year after Christmas he set the boxes on the highest shelf of Aunt Polly's and Uncle George's storage shed. The boxes are practically the only things not rotted by the rushing, then standing, water that covered this small, historic town for nearly two weeks this fall.

But somehow, even with the excitement of finding their treasures, Sarah and Kathryn begin to feel a little hollow as they dig deeper in the boxes. Even this pleasant surprise cannot erase all that has happened since the shiny icicles and glittered seashells last trimmed the tree.

The destruction. The loss. The displacement.

As Kathryn loops the last ornament around a branch, she walks away, looks back, and says, with a touch of disappointment: "It really wasn't like normal this year."

She means the tree decorating. But she could mean so much more. Thanksgiving wasn't really normal this year, spent away from home, with her extended family scattered about. The Christmas piano recital wasn't normal, either - her piano sat swamped, unplayable in her old home while she had nothing to practice on in the weeks leading up to the event.

In fact, nothing has been even close to normal since the frantic night of Sept. 16, when the rapidly rising floodwaters swept away life as the Pohlman family - and so many people Down East - once knew it.

A new address

It was three months and three days ago that the Tar River took away everything the Pohlmans took for granted. Their quiet life in the country, surrounded by family. Their routines of school and work, piano lessons and summer trips to the beach. Their identities as husband, wife, daughter, fifth-grader, teacher, administrator.

Today, Sarah, Tom and Kathryn live in an apartment on the outskirts of town. In this new life, they wash their clothes in a coin laundry a few doors away; their yard is a small buffer of trees between them and a strip mall; three police cars pulled into the driveway two Sundays ago to arrest a group of teens for possession of drugs. Things that never happened near their home before.

Each morning these days, Sarah, flyaway hair framing her face, and Kathryn, tall and ponytailed, start off by driving to the high-ceilinged, double-wide trailer where they used to live. They begin each day feeding the eight cats and two dogs they have to leave fenced in out there.

After school - Sarah teaches high school math and science at the private Tarboro/Edgecomb Academy, where Kathryn is a fifth-grader - mother and daughter go back to the trailer. There, they slowly sort through their mud- and mold-covered things to find what can be salvaged.

Working box by box, they take a stack of records or a flower pot or a ceramic umbrella stand back to the apartment to clean with bleach, leave to soak and set by the door. Eventually, the stuff will go to a storage shed behind the trailer where the Pohlmans are keeping their future - all the items they don't need for day-to-day living.

Then, the family gathers anything it can't use (such as clothes Kathryn is quickly outgrowing) to give to those who might need them.

Once, someone brought over a couch that Sarah had no need for, so she loaded it into her forest green Pathfinder and drove around town until she found a woman who had lost even more than she in the flood. This woman's aid money had come through,

enabling her to buy a house. But she didn't have a stick of furniture. Sarah and Tom helped take her new sofa inside.

After dark, on top of grading papers and checking homework, Sarah writes thank-you notes to the scores of people and churches and groups who have opened their wallets or emptied their attics to help the Pohlmanns keep their heads above water since September.

"It's just been incredible," Sarah says of the donations, which have come from as far away as Georgia and Arizona.

So while much of Tarboro is beginning to move beyond last fall's disaster - new businesses have opened, old ones have expanded, people are again hosting weddings - nearly every day of Sarah's and Kathryn's lives is structured, even defined, by the flood.

Which is why, once their insurance money and a small business loan come through, the family plans to move to Greenville. That's where Tom, thin, mustachioed and quiet, works as an environmental manager at East Carolina University. And that's where this family of three will have a shot at a fresh start.

It won't be what was once normal - walking out the door to go to granddaddy's, knowing every inch and every face in town. But it will be a new beginning.

"I don't think we could ever stay in Tarboro," Sarah says. "We'd always be the people that flooded."

Roots in Tarboro

This was no easy decision, choosing to leave town. The low, flat ground where the Pohlmanns had made their home for the last 10 years was the same field Sarah moved to when she was 12, her sister Carol was 7 and their mother was still alive.

Carolina Telephone led the family to Tarboro in 1962. Lenwood Dixon, Sarah's father, had been working for a company that transferred him every few years, and Sarah's mother had grown weary of upheaval. She convinced Dixon to take a new job, move their mobile home and settle on four acres of farmland.

In the beginning, the river - the same river that would wash away everything three decades later - was the family's nearest neighbor, and Sarah would often walk down its steep banks, seeking company and communing with nature.

Dixon, though, had a plan for the land. Over the years, he planted sturdy pines and dug trenches to lay water and sewer lines. He bought up neighboring property when he could. Lot by lot, he built a trailer park, as an investment - and a community - for his eventual retirement. That was the site of Sarah's childhood.

College and an independent streak took her out of Tarboro the first time. She went to ECU, then worked in Greenville, attended graduate school in Oklahoma. She left when the money ran out and ended up in Athens, Ga., where she hired, then married, Tom.

Once she got pregnant, the call of family and home rang loudly. She and Tom moved back to Tarboro, back to the trailer park, where she could live out in the country as she loves to, where she could walk down to the river again for solace, where she would have family nearby to help care for her daughter.

All of which she misses already, cooped up in her apartment. In the two bedroom split-level she can hear the neighbors and the road instead of birds' songs. There, family baby sitters are no longer just a few feet away.

So, no, leaving Tarboro was not a snap decision. Sarah's ties to this town are strong. But this time, the winds of change were stronger.

The ripple effects

The Pohlmanns are not the only ones being blown off course, these days. Like a stone thrown in a pond, the flood's effects have circled out in all directions, touching nearly everyone in Sarah's family - even those who at first seemed to escape harm.

Like Carol Bundy, Sarah's fast-talking, redheaded sister. Her house and her belongings were not damaged by the flood. But her husband was. The stress and uncertainty of the disaster sent him spiraling. He lost his job. And his depression is straining their marriage.

"Boy, all I can say is this is harder than I thought it was going to be," Bundy says. "I guess I sort of thought that after the water receded, that would be the end of it. The hardest part has been the long-term effects."

Sarah's father, Dixon, had a mobile home that sat on higher ground than hers, so he was able to salvage his house. But only by cutting off the lower third of the walls and studs - and replacing the entire floor. Even now, his home is a long way from being livable. The walls have not been replaced; the beams show through like a skeleton without its skin.

Dixon, short and easygoing, has lost income as well. He has charged no rent to people whose lost trailers sit on his land, and he will likely have to absorb the cost of a new survey of the 7 1/2 acres he owns to ensure the lots comply with current flood plain maps. That must be done before the electricity can be restored in the park - and surveyors are as hard to find as deer during hunting season.

The stress took its toll in October when Dixon landed in the hospital. His heart squeezed tight like a heart attack and he ended up in surgery. Sarah took a week off to care for him; he recovered on the donated sleeper sofa in Sarah's apartment living room.

"Most of the time, I'm pretty good-natured," he says now. He's up and on his own again and trying to handle each new surprise - like having to get the survey. "Most of the time."

But in some ways, the day-in and day-out of living has been hardest on the Osbornes, Sarah's aunt and uncle, both in their 80s.

They drove out the night of the flood with a few clothes, a few pictures and their gun. And that's all they have today.

Since September, they have lived as nomads, spending a night at a daughter's in New Bern, a week at a son's in Cape Carteret, time with friends in town. Their new mobile home arrived, after three delays, last Monday. Now they must wait for the surveyor, for the inspector, for the electrician. Waiting and more waiting.

"It's been hell, living here and yonder," George Osborne says, anger sparking from his gray eyes. "I never thought I'd see the day that I'd be in this bad shape."

And as if this weren't enough for one family to bear, in late October, Tom's father went into the hospital in Arizona with a blood clot in his leg. Tom resisted visiting, with so much turmoil at home. But doctors had to amputate the leg, and Tom's father didn't respond well to his medicine.

"I think my Daddy's dying," he said to Sarah before he hopped a plane to Phoenix the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. He was to return to Tarboro Saturday.

Life in limbo

As much as this life for the Pohlman and their extended family is nearly unrecognizable as their own, all the changes so far have only led to a sort of limbo: Nothing is in its final state; everything is still in transition and all energy is focused on merely getting back to the place they were before the flood knocked them down.

"This is not going to end for another 10, 15, maybe even 20 years," Tom says, with frustration and resignation in his voice. "I can't see us getting back to where we were before then."

Sarah can't believe she is still salvaging and cleaning. To don a face mask and walk back into her destroyed home - where dozens of National Geographic magazines covered in a thick, black mold litter the floor, where the floor itself has buckled into a series of lumps, where even light fixtures were swamped by the fetid water that reached 6 1/2 feet inside - takes her right back to the weeks after the flood. She becomes angry, then sad, then overwhelmed.

Some days, she cannot go in. Some days she runs upstairs in her apartment and cries. One day, she drove to her old home and stood outside and "just screamed and hollered and cussed and got it out of my system," she says. "I was screaming at the river. I was screaming at the river."

She and Kathryn both are haunted by the flood. Sarah can't stand to hear "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," the song Kathryn practiced incessantly on the piano the day before the waters washed in. "I really used to like that song," Sarah says. Now, it only dredges up painful memories.

Though Kathryn has had a hard time staying focused this semester, Sarah is amazed at how well her daughter has weathered all that has come their way.

Throughout it all, Sarah has fought a burning desire to flee - to a tropical island, to a sandy beach, anywhere but Tarboro.

"On Oct. 12," she remembers, "it was our anniversary and we went to Rocky Mount to eat. ... That was the first time I left town 'cause I said if I left, I wasn't coming back."

This month, Sarah stood at the sink in her apartment, hands in dingy gray water as she washed and rewashed a cross stitching and mulled over the autumn she had just lived through.

"No, I never thought we'd be here for Christmas. Thanksgiving, maybe. But I figured we'd be in our new home by Christmas."

The new home that they haven't even begun looking for. In a new town, 30 miles away.

Nature's way

In the days after the flood, Sarah and Tom remember they had a renewed appreciation for the world of nature that in their regular, busy lives they had all but stopped seeing.

A rat that paddled across a flooded field in the height of the disaster suddenly looked heroic, courageous, like a survivor.

A hawk that circled overhead stirred their envy - he could resettle so easily; he had none of the extra encumbrances they had acquired and stored and tended.

As they spent two days waiting for the water to recede in September, they parked alongside a healthy flowering shrub that attracted dozens of hummingbirds - sprightly, alive, more beautiful than anything they had lost. And they realized they never even knew hummingbirds flocked here - despite a decade of living just down the lane.

It all got them thinking about what they had been missing as they commuted and cooked, entered data and met deadlines.

Mother Nature also taught them the most important lesson they will take away from this time of trial and survival. She showed them that no matter how bad things seem or how hopeless they feel, life goes on. Tomorrow can be a new opportunity to make and experience beauty, if you let it.

That lesson kept repeating itself. As they moved into an apartment and away from their pets, they looked out their back door and found ... squirrels, playful and entertaining, there to fill the void. They scrounged up a feeder and began stocking it with corncobs.

They worried about their cats, left to fend for themselves at the old house, only to discover that they were fine, sporting thick, glossy winter coats.

Nature adapts and endures, this told them. God gives you what you need to carry on.

"More than anything else, I'm stronger spiritually," Tom says. "This has let me know that if you need strength, it'll be there. I never knew I could go through so much."

Just last week, Tom arranged live-in care for his dad so Tom could come back to Tarboro for Christmas. The family will celebrate in their apartment, making the best of this blessed day in this strange year.

The Pohlmanns will share Christmas 1999 with father and sister, aunt and uncle, daughter and granddaddy. And though it will be simpler, smaller than in years past, it will also be more special. This family now knows to cherish every moment together. To exchange memories more than gifts.

They have learned much in three months. And each will look to the future through new eyes.