

## 23 Ike victims remain missing from Bolivar

### Families struggling between grief and hope

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PORT BOLIVAR — It was a haunting statement, spoken with the kind of conviction that now seems to epitomize the story of dozens of people who remain missing after Hurricane Ike:

"I just called to tell you bye and I love you. ... I'm going to die. Me and Charles Allen are going to drown."

Those were the words of Delores Brookshire, 72, missing since Sept. 12. One month after the storm, that phone call, made to her cousin, echoes across the Bolivar Peninsula where 23 people remain unaccounted for and most are presumed dead.

Despite pleas, the task of recovering remains has been slow, if not altogether absent in some remote areas. Only six bodies have been discovered in storm debris so far, washed up in remote Chambers County marshlands or hidden in the mucky terrain of Goat Island.

Some have yet to be identified by the Galveston County Medical Examiner's Office. They lie

silently, waiting for forensic evidence — X-rays, scars, tattoos, DNA — to give each a name.

State game wardens, volunteers with trained cadaver dogs and others have worked for weeks to search remote debris sites and flag areas that possibly hold human remains. But four weeks after the storm, no one has been able to excavate so-called "hot spots" identified by dogs.

Galveston County officials said it could be 10 days or more before that work begins.

Families don't know whether to grieve or cling to hope.

No one knows what happened to Brookshire and her disabled son, Charles Allen Garrett, 42. Brookshire telephoned her cousin just before dawn on Sept. 12. She said she was trapped by the storm surge in their small wooden house just a few blocks from the Gulf of Mexico. Neither owned a car. Their ride had not arrived.

Glennis Dunn's six children want to know what happened to their widowed mother, who celebrated her 70th birthday alone with her dog, Jacques, in her near-empty neighborhood in Crystal Beach on Sept. 11 — the day mandatory evacuation was ordered. She planned to stay, she told her children when they called from out of state with birthday wishes.

But sometime that next morning, she changed her mind.

Son Daniel Roske, who drove from Ohio and then

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joined up with the Red Cross to search after the storm, found his mother's car, smashed, about 300 yards from the beach. In the trunk were her late husband's war medals and an overnight bag with a change of clothes. At her home, there's only a slab, a lawn chair and scattered kitchen utensils.

### **Concerned for Bolivar**

In all, more than 200 people remain missing a full month after Hurricane Ike, despite intense efforts by volunteers and investigators who have cleared more than 200 other cases, according to data collected through a hot line operated by the nonprofit Laura Recovery Center. Authorities say they continue to believe many displaced Galveston Islanders and others are on the list in error.

Those authorities are openly worried, however, about missing Bolivar Peninsula residents.

Of the six bodies discovered among storm debris near the peninsula, four — rendered unrecognizable by the elements and the passage of time — have not yet been identified by the Galveston County Medical Examiner's office.

Three bodies were found during a huge multiday recovery push in Galveston County that involved dozens of volunteer cadaver dog teams from across Texas, members of the U.S. HERO search-and-rescue groups and about a dozen representatives from Texas Task Force One, among others. That effort concluded Oct. 5, after the marking of several potential recovery sites.

So far, searchers have concentrated on the hot spots on the Bolivar Peninsula and on Goat Island — a strip of marsh and fill just across the Intracoastal Waterway from the peninsula.

For days, volunteer dog teams, guarded by volunteer "flankers" bearing guns to ward off alligator attacks, patrolled Goat Island afoot, using compasses to methodically cover the marsh. Bizarre bits of storm debris served as landmarks. A cow's bloated body. A piece of a wall in a tree. A displaced house that sits oddly intact atop marsh grass, with bar stools still pulled up at a counter inside.

At times, searchers followed trails carved by gators themselves — descending into muddy holes marked with tracks made by huge clawed feet. Just as often, the searchers mounted hills of wreckage or crossed bridges forged by storm-damaged surfboards, coolers and 2-by-4s. Repeatedly, volunteers fell without warning through weak spots, descending toward unseen hazards.

### **Dogs mark hot spots**

Humans smelled and saw dead animals — ducks, rats, rabbits — almost everywhere. Dogs were more discerning. One German shepherd refused to leave a debris pile more than 10 feet tall, and then sat slowly and deliberately on top — marking a potential site.

Dogs have identified other potential hot spots in the San Leon and Crystal Beach areas as well as among more than 40 debris piles near Smith

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Point in Chambers County.

Though a Galveston County news release said officials are skeptical of potential Crystal Beach sites, none has been excavated.

Galveston County Judge Jim Yarbrough said the county is working on a plan to systematically "peel back" layers of wreckage on the peninsula with the help of a debris contractor. He said, however, it's unclear whether the county or the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will conduct further operations on Goat Island; the Corps uses the privately owned island.

All searches must be done carefully and respectfully, he said, even if other recovery efforts are delayed.

Separately, Yarbrough said officials are deciding how to search stranded vehicles linked to missing persons. A car and a pickup mired in sand off Texas 87 already have been tied to one missing family: Marion Violet Arrambide; her daughter, Magdalena Strickland; and her grandson, Shane Williams.

All three disappeared when they tried to evacuate Sept. 12.

Their families now believe that they gave a ride that morning to Delores Brookshire and her son, who lived two blocks away in Port Bolivar

Brookshire still worked at 72 to support herself and her adult son.

Brookshire's cousin Jo Ann Mier, of Orange, said

Brookshire's last phone call continues to trouble her.

"She was my best friend," Mier said. "I can't help but feel that we let her drown, and yet there's nothing we could have done. She was asking for help, but by Friday, the roads were all blocked."

Mier wants to hold a memorial service at her cousin's homesite, though the peninsula remains closed to non-residents.

"My husband says, 'What if she's still alive, and she comes back with crosses on her property?' I say, 'Then, we'll hug her neck.' "

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