

Weathering the Storm

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The road to success was paved with obstacles for four candidates for Tulane's master of fine arts degree. The quartet of students was admitted during the semester that Hurricane Katrina ripped through New Orleans, postponing their matriculation a year from when they originally planned to graduate.



John Oles, left, and Barbie L'Hoste look forward to receiving their MFA degrees at commencement on Saturday (May 17), a year after their anticipated graduation. They took classes at the University of Georgia and Yale University after evacuating following Hurricane Katrina. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

For Barbie L'Hoste of New Orleans and John Oles of Wrentham, Mass., recalling the past three years of studies at Tulane evokes a medley of pleasant and painful memories.

In August 2005, prior to Katrina's arrival, L'Hoste and Oles, along with [classmates](#) Megan Hillerud and Blake Sanders, began celebrating their acceptance to the two-year [master of fine arts degree program](#).

Since L'Hoste was familiar with hurricanes, she warned her classmates to evacuate when Hurricane Katrina headed for New Orleans. Oles says he heeded her warning, but left town oblivious to what damage could result from a strong hurricane.

“After she called, I left with my toothbrush, a change of clothes and my guitar,” says Oles. “I went to Texas to stay with a friend, thinking that I would just be gone for a couple days. It really hit me when I was watching the news and the whole levee breach thing happened.”

In the following weeks, L'Hoste began her trek by car to Connecticut, where she was invited to spend a semester at Yale University. Oles enrolled in classes at the University of Georgia. Since cell phone calls were nearly impossible at first due to hurricane-damaged towers and high-call volume, the MFA students kept in touch via text messaging.



A dinosaur paddles with water wings in “Sink or Swim,” by MFA candidate Blake Sanders, created with the Hurricane Katrina experience in mind. (Photo by Alicia Duplessis)

Only a month and a half into her semester at Yale, L'Hoste realized that she wanted to return to New Orleans and to Tulane.

“I couldn't stand being away from my family and I'd seen pictures of my house so I decided to drop out and come back home,” says L'Hoste.

Meanwhile, 17 hours away in Georgia, Oles was enduring a different experience.

“While I was taking classes at UGA I was sleeping in my car,” says Oles, who later received housing assistance from a local Red Cross agency.

When the group returned to New Orleans they spent much of their post-Katrina semester helping to clear out their flooded art studios on the uptown campus.

L'Hoste and Oles' classmate Blake Sanders says it was difficult to avoid the influence of Katrina in his art. He used the experience to create pieces like “Sink or Swim,” which depicts a dinosaur swimming in neck-high water wearing bright orange water wings.

“That piece was sort of a poke at global warming and how storms are getting worse because of it,” Sanders says. “The dinosaur is a parallel for humans because they were the dominant species at that time and humans should know that we aren't as special as we think we are.”

As the new school year rolled around, a new class of five was admitted to the program so the class size grew to nine.

“Even when the new students came in, the four of us kept this really tight bond,” says L'Hoste who acknowledges the support of [Newcomb Art Department](#) chair Jeremy Jernegan. “Unfortunately, it took us an extra year to finish, but we made it and we're pretty glad it's over.”

The other members of this year's graduating MFA class at Tulane are: Jane Hipple, Bruce Mackh, Marc-Anthony Polizzi, David E. Robinson and Cynthia Scott.