

The Gazette

CHEVY CHASE

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Westfield Works Wonders: An evening of fun and discounts Sunday at both locations from 6:30-9:30 p.m. Check out today's special section for more.



Rachel Jordan/The Gazette

Kenneth White, a Hurricane Katrina victim from New Orleans, smiles at Maverick while he makes edible Christmas trees for dogs. Maverick is begging for a milk bone that is part of the tree decoration.

Employment, new life after storm

Hurricane Katrina victim finds hope with Bethesda company

by Sharon Cho
Staff Writer

Kenneth White lost everything on Aug. 29. That's the day Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast region.

White, 53, left his home in New Orleans a week later — finally forced out by authorities because of unlivable conditions — with a radio, a few

clothes and his pregnant fiancée. White had only moved from Orlando, Fla., to New Orleans about three months prior to Hurricane Katrina. His company, S&S Moving, relocated him there.

Everything else from his home is gone. Since then, he was flown to the D.C. Armory and now lives in a small apartment in Washington, D.C., where he has already started to make a new life for himself and his fiancée, Shant Walker.

He is making that new start with the help of Trish Kiesewetter, owner of Maverick Creative, Inc., in Bethesda, who employs White and one other

victim of Hurricane Katrina to make edible Christmas trees for dogs. Edible Christmas trees are two-foot tall trees that have little gold balls and red bows tied to milk bones all throughout the trees.

"It's something new and the work's not hard," White said. "I was happy and excited when I heard I got the job."

White found his job after a few visits to the employment centers in Washington, D.C., he said. Surprisingly, he said, it was not so hard for him to get a new job.

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His life now is starting to begin again with a home and a job, albeit temporary, which seems so far from the difficult days following the hurricane.

White was trying to survive the 175 mile per hour winds, 2,000 miles away in Bethesda, Kiesewetter, a Bethesda resident, was watching the devastation on TV, wondering how she might be able to help.

She realized she could help evacuees and her business for the two months before the holidays. She contacted the D.C. Department of Employment Services in September and promised to employ two of the hurricane victims.

"I knew I could give money, but I kept thinking that what these survivors needed was some kind of tangible hope," she said. "I decided this was the perfect thing."

And she thought, "I can teach anybody to tie a bow," she said.

White spent much of his life, 20 years, working for S&S Moving as a furniture mover — first in Orlando, then in New Orleans, where the company was headquartered. But now, he and his fiancée are content to live in an area where hurricanes are not a threat.

"After what happened, I don't miss New Orleans," he said.

White works flexible hours, depending on how many tree orders are received and his pay depends on the number of trees he produces throughout the season. He roughly earns between \$10 and \$22 per tree and Kiesewetter provides the ride and food for her workers.

Kiesewetter said she plans to hire more evacuees when the demand for trees increases.

Her company sold 130 trees last Christmas, but White said he is determined to make as many trees as he can. The company could possibly make up to 3,000 trees, according to Kiesewetter.

For now, White plans to work for Kiesewetter through the holidays and will then look for another, more permanent job.

"Every thing was fine until the hurricane hit," he said. "It became hectic after that."

He remembers the day vividly, how winds swept through the region, overturning cars, blowing signs onto his home and sounding like trains passing right next to them, he said.

Surviving the wind and rain was only the first test. Excessive amounts of water poured in the

next day and swimming became the only method of survival, he said.

"We had to swim across 20 feet of water to get food," he said. "Originally a 10 minute walk took two hours."

Hurricane Katrina caused estimated damages between \$70 billion and \$150 billion.

Putting the memory of New Orleans behind him, White said making the edible Christmas trees gives him hope.

"You get to see how beautiful they look after you're done," he said.

It takes him more than an hour to make a tree, White said, and he has made eight trees so far. He's just happy to be away from heavy lifting, he said, and he is not the only one enjoying the job.

"This is a lot easier," he said, "and [my fiancée] is happy as long as I don't go back to furniture movement."