

My favorite part of the Christmas story is when the Bethlehem innkeeper, pressed for space, creates a makeshift room for Mary and Joseph in his stable. Although this incident is commonly cited as an indication of the holy family's humble origins, I've always preferred to look at it from a different angle, how an everyday person's act of generosity can play a vital role in a Really Big Event. It also illustrates the importance of being flexible; if you don't have an extra room, why not fluff up the hay and use a cattle stall as a spare bed? It beats turning a young mother-to-be back out onto the streets.

I have thought of that innkeeper's resourcefulness and generosity over the past weeks as we have watched—in Atlanta and across the country—people welcoming evacuees from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Outside of cities in Louisiana and Texas, Atlanta was the leading destination for the Katrina diaspora, and I like to think that is attributable in large part to our civic hospitality and bigheartedness. We're also adaptable: Just as that stable was a makeshift nursery, we've seen Alexander Memorial Coliseum on the Georgia Tech campus turned into a shelter while churches, rec centers, high-school gyms and other unlikely spaces became homes, if only for a while.

Most remarkable of all is how Atlantans have welcomed friends, family and, sometimes, total strangers into their homes. These are not short-term offers of help. Many evacuees will be stranded for months; some have left their old homes forever. The hurricane may not dominate the 24-hour news channels, but it's still big news to the more than 29,000 evacuees who've made Atlanta home. Extended families crowd into too-small houses, kids make their way in new schools, people hunt for jobs, find doctors, settle into new routines and try to carry on with life as usual after an experience that the rest of us still cannot begin to imagine.

Staff writer Chandra Thomas, a native of New Orleans, found herself with a new roommate—her 77-year-old grandmother—and a larger circle of kinfolk in Atlanta than she'd ever imagined. "Maybe I will finally learn to make gumbo!" she joked when learning of yet another relative moving here. Keeping humor in the face of horror is one of the lessons her family has had to learn, as Chandra relates in "Where the Heart Is," page 70. As she, her mother, cousins, grandmother, great-aunt and great-uncle, father, stepmother and dozens of friends and family members have learned over the past months, sometimes being flexible is all that you can do.

The holiday season is when we always think of family, but for Chandra's family—and literally a million others—this year's will be particularly meaningful. While there may be no room at the inn (or the motel or the guest room or the shelter), there will be room in our hearts.

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