

## Family from Louisiana finds solace in Port Chester

By Masha Rumer

Westmore News, Port Chester, New York. Feb. 10, 2006

Digna Johnson, her mother and her son will finally have a home of their own when they move into a house across the street from the Bethesda Baptist Church in Port Chester.

Johnson has been on the move since Hurricane Katrina destroyed her home and much of the Gulf Coast region at the end of August. She had stayed in Baton Rouge with 17 people in her niece's apartment, at a hotel in Houston, in her sister Lourdes's family's apartment in the Bronx, and at a hotel in Queens.

This weekend Johnson, her son Christon, and her mother Marcelina Nunez are moving into a remodeled colonial five-bedroom at 137 William St., donated by Bethesda Baptist Church. Johnson's daughter will visit on vacations from the University of Louisiana Lafayette, where she is a student.

"It was chaotic down there. Traffic was not moving," Johnson, a Spanish teacher at a private school, said. It took nearly 13 hours to evacuate from her home in Terry Town to Baton Rouge by car, a trip that normally takes an hour.

The school where she taught, Desire Street Academy, was destroyed.

"All the hotels were booked up in the Baton Rouge area. A lot of people had to stay with whoever they could or were sleeping in cars," said Johnson, who has lived in Terry Town, about five miles southeast of New Orleans, since she moved from Honduras as a little girl.

Her son Chris, a seventh grader, evacuated with his dad and reunited with Johnson later.

Bethesda Baptist Church located Johnson through the Salvation Army. They have remodeled the house with new plumbing, appliances, carpeting, and heating. The furniture and appliances were donated by the local community from Port Chester and the Rye Presbyterian Church, an effort led by Scott Cannell, an elder and chairman of the Rye church's mission and outreach committee.

Cheryl Washington, wife of The Reverend Gerald Washington, Sr., pastor of Bethesda Baptist, helped put up the curtains, and his son Jeremiah did some painting.

"I love it! Oh—and a shower!" exclaimed Dorothy Pervis from Jamaica, Queens, Rev. Washington's mother in law, as she inspected the new white rugs and tiles in the bathroom. "Look, nobody saw this—I did. They did a good job, I tell you. I've seen this, but I've never seen it like this.

I saw it in the rough," she said.

On welcoming day, Jan. 22, the church community crowded in the living room, linking hands, praying and singing.

"Bless this house and bless the occupants of this house," said Rev. Washington. "From the foundation to the roof, sanctify it and purify it. Let them rise up and take advantage of this blessing."

Johnson stood in the center, disoriented and smiling.

"It's like wow, a house, is it gonna be okay? Are we gonna find some stability?" she reflected later. "I believe in prayers and the relationship with the Lord. He's keeping His word to me," she said, overwhelmed by the welcome.

Johnson thanked Manuel Arrias, a day laborer, in Spanish. Together with Cannell, he worked on the house and stopped by for the celebration.

Johnson's mother has recently been discharged from Lebanon Hospital in the Bronx after complications following a ruptured appendix.



*Digna Johnson and her son Christon in their new home*

For her son Chris, who will attend Port Chester Middle School, the challenge has been "having to leave everything, friends and stuff like that." He's lost touch with most of them.

Later, Johnson wandered by the beige curtains in the living room and neatly-made beds and couches. "I already know I'll put a little table here," she said, pointing to the corridor next to the staircase. "I had a vase and ivories, Fica trees and a rubber tree, more southern," she explained.

She misses her red beans and rice, gumbo po' boys, and jambalaya. Her best friend is in Georgia and other family and friends are scattered all over the United States; she hasn't located her uncle yet.

But Johnson hopes to find a job and get back to the routine: work, read, hit the gym, go for bike rides with Chris and spend more time with him. "I know it's kind of stressful for him, so we do more family-oriented things," she said.

"Time has healed, a little bit of normalcy has taken place," she added. "I wanted to go back in a way, but then there's nothing much to go back for. I don't know what my future holds, all I have is the now."