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Sharad Mulchand and his family, in New Orleans to help daughter Radha move to college dorms, narrowly escaped Hurricane Katrina.

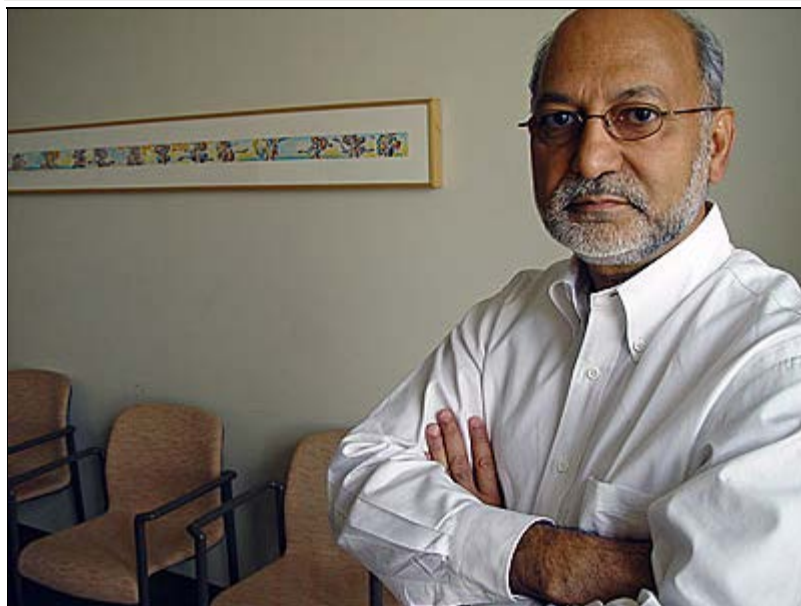


PHOTO: GAYLE ANDERSON

Metro's Mulchand and Family Narrowly Escape Hurricane Katrina

- Family motorcade skirted flooded areas in search of safety

By BILL HEARD and PERRY WILLIAMS

(Sept. 1, 2005) A former New Orleans resident and veteran of Gulf Coast hurricanes, Metro's Sharad Mulchand wasn't especially worried as Hurricane Katrina approached the historic city. And he felt relief when the powerful storm began to veer away to the east.

He, his wife, Madhuri, and five members of his extended family were in New Orleans to move his daughter, Radha Mistry, 18, a freshman architecture student, into the dorms at Tulane University.

Saturday was moving day. "She was all excited," said Mulchand, "you could see it in her eyes."

But, with the hurricane approaching, Mulchand and family members also took the precaution of boarding up his sister's house. "We didn't think it would be a big deal, we'd been through it before. We even bought groceries."

He also turned in his rental car that day. "I'm glad I returned the rental car, because I knew someone would be able to use it to get out of the city."

Family took a vote

Then, the family took a vote on whether to ride out the storm or evacuate. Since only one member favored evacuating, they all settled down for the night.

But, at 2 a.m. on Sunday, Mulchand's brother-in-law became worried about the rising storm. By 4 a.m., the family had made a collective decision to pack up and leave.

They piled into two family cars, then drove to the airport. All flights had been cancelled, so most of the family headed out for Baton Rouge on Interstate 10 – only to learn that the freeway was blocked. His sister, Vasu, drove north to Natchez, Miss.

A detour got them out of New Orleans, but evacuee traffic was bumper-to-bumper, even though authorities had opened both incoming and outgoing lanes to cars leaving the city.

'It was surreal'

"We were moving at 10 miles per hour out of the city," Mulchand recalls. "All along the road were news cameras and crews with lights on us as we evacuated. It was surreal. You would have thought we were on a movie set."

Four hours and 70 miles later, the family motorcade reached Baton Rouge. All the stations along the road were swamped with motorists needing gas.

"All the pumps, except supreme, were out of gas," said Mulchand. "Without hesitating, I immediately pulled up and told the attendant to fill it up"

Cramming back into the family cars, the group continued on to Beaumont, Tex., arriving about 6 p.m., Sunday. They had dinner and then pushed on to Houston, arriving at 10:30 p.m. – ending a 16-and-a-half-hour journey.

Calls from relatives

The family then scattered, some going to Natchez, Miss., some to Austin, Tex., Little Rock, Ark., and the rest to California. Concerned relatives and friends in England, Canada and India have called to check on them.

Now, back home in Los Angeles, Mulchand has no idea how Katrina may have damaged his two sisters' New Orleans home. "I regret not getting photos from the '30s and '40s that my dad took," he says. "How I wish I had grabbed that box."

The family also has to find another college for Radha, who will arrive in LA from Austin on Saturday. Luckily, she has been accepted at USC and the Southern California Institute of Architecture, but no decision has been made.

Despite their narrow escape from the storm and resulting flood, Mulchand is upbeat, saying he's "positive that the city of New Orleans will function again...and it will be back!"

