WINDS OF CHANGE

Lives transformed by the storm

KELLY DENISE BENSABAT

Pre-K: Paralegal
Post-K: Bed and breakfast operator and organic gardener

By Chris Bynum
Staff writer

An ill wind blows some good, Kelly Denise Bensabat would say. But on her 48th birthday a week after Hurricane Katrina, the former paralegal had her doubts as Blackhawk helicopters whirred overheard.

"There were downed trees all around, love bugs crawling all over me, I was trying to wash clothes in a muck bucket, and I had to stand by the chicken coop to get cell phone reception," recalled Bensabat, who rode out the hurricane with her family on their 30-acre farm in Bush.

A series of events in Bensabat's life earlier in 2005 had pointed her on the road to change. Katrina would propel her all the way down that road.

Her 24-year-old stepson had died unexpectedly in May. Two months later, her grown children left home for a house closer to their jobs, leaving Bensabat with a bad case of empty-nest syndrome.

But instead of three empty rooms, Bensabat saw the potential for a bed and breakfast on the farm near the Bogue Chitto River she and her husband purchased in 1988. In addition to the pastoral elements of country living from riding trails to fishing ponds, the family home had been enlarged to include a pool, cabana and hot tub.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHUCK COOK

Bensabat started decorating the empty bedrooms and sending e-mails to friends announcing her plans. Three weeks after the storm hit, her lawyer-husband had quadruple bypass surgery, leaving her to handle the farm chores alone. Instead of derailing her plans, it steeled her resolve. Bensabat says the day she pulled up in her yard with 50 bales of hay in her truck, a bad tire and no one to help her unload was "the last straw" — and the first step toward recovering her dream.

"Once I unloaded the hay and fixed that flat, I was on a roll," Bensabat says. "I knew I could do it. I was going for it."

Bensabat quit her job as a paralegal in early January and read every instructional book on the bed-and-breakfast business she could find.

"I wanted to do something that made me happy, and I wanted to do something with the farm so we would have a place to retire," she says. "No more clock punching and passing paper day after day. The thrill of getting a new case was gone."

Bensabat now spends her days in the horse stables, dog kennels and organic gardens of the farm she continues to expand. In her bedroom hangs a reminder of the day she claimed her dream.

"I was just browsing the Internet and found it," she says. The framed print on her bedroom wall is entitled "The Last Straw," and it depicts a blonde woman in jeans sitting on the running board of a truck stacked with hay. The truck has a flat tire. And there's a dog looking sympathetically at his master.

There it was, Bensabat's turning point illustrated.

In addition to the B&B operation, Bensabat grows organic vegetables and micro greens for north shore restaurants. She raises dachshunds for direct sale to loving homes. And she is, in her husband's satisfied assessment, a gourmet cook.

All that Bensabat loves is now part of a day's work. Her name for her home and business: Splendor Farms.

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