

Later, as gusts topped 130 miles an hour, he could hear trees crashing and flying debris banging against his groaning one-story brick house. With a flashlight, he ventured outside and was nearly blown over by the fierce winds that were ripping shingles off the roof. *Uh-oh, I screwed up*, he thought. *I should have left when I had the chance.*

Back inside, Colletti noticed water dripping from the ceiling, down the walls, and onto the floor. He grabbed tarps and draped them over the sofa and other furniture. His animal heads—trophies from his hunting trips—were getting soaked in his game room. He took plastic totes that held his hunting gear and emptied them. Then he hurried around the house, snatching cherished family pictures off the walls and collecting his wedding album and his kids' photo albums. He stuffed all the pictures into the totes and put them on the kitchen table.

Through it all, the family pet, a dachshund named Peanut, trembled and stuck close to his master's heels. Colletti tried to get some sleep, but it was impossible, not with the shrieking wind and sounds of blown debris battering houses and vehicles.

The next morning, just as Katrina thundered over St. Bernard Parish, Colletti peered outside. The cascading, wind-whipped rain was pounding the area, while the unrelenting gusts sent fences and parts of roofs skidding down the street, which was covered with a few inches of water.

His fishing buddy Bob Roberts, who earlier had evacuated to a relative's home in Alexandria, Louisiana, about 200 miles

northwest of New Orleans, called Colletti's cell phone around 9 A.M. "Brother, where you at?" Roberts asked.

"I'm still home, Bob."

"Man, I've got bad news. The levees broke in St. Bernard. Pretty soon you're gonna be underwater. Get outta there now!"

After the call, Colletti opened the front door. The water on the street looked no worse than it did during any big storm. A short while later, Peanut, who hadn't let his master out of his sight, scampered toward the back of the house. *What the heck is goin' on here?* wondered Colletti after finding Peanut shivering in fear under a bed. Colletti got down on his hands and knees to pull out the terrified dog.

And that's when he noticed the floor was sopping wet. *Water is coming up through the floorboards! That's not from the rain.* By the time he put Peanut into a dog carrier and set it on the kitchen table, water was spurting out of every crack in the molding at the bottom of the walls and under the windows.

Colletti dashed into the living room and looked out the window; he was thunderstruck. Floodwaters had already reached the knob of the front door. Cars and trucks were floating past his house before they had a chance to sink. Caught in a strong 20-mile-an-hour current, the vehicles were bouncing into houses before disappearing from view.

*This is unreal!* he thought.

Clutching the dog kennel that held his pet, Colletti opened the door to escape to his boat. But the water rushed into the

house with such force that it washed him through the living room, dining room, kitchen, and into the game room before he was finally able to regain his footing. During this unexpected water ride, Peanut was dunked several times even though Colletti never let go of the kennel.

He slogged his way to the open front door and waded in the swift current to his boat, which was still attached to the trailer by the bow, causing the stern to bob high. He put his terrified, crated dog into the boat and then went back inside for the totes that contained the photos and, along with some food and other items, tossed them in the *Big Fish*.

The ferocious wind and lashing rain made it difficult to see as he used his knife to cut the rope that was holding the boat to the trailer. Once the craft was freed, gusts pushed it against the house next door and then another.

As soon as he got the engine cranked up, he heard Pitre hollering, "Donald, come get me and my mama!" The floodwaters had risen so high that Pitre and his mother were hanging on to the gutters under the roof of their house.

Battling the wind and current, Colletti steered his boat past floating cars and debris toward the pair. When he finally reached them, he idled the engine. Pitre and Miss Joyce let go of the gutters and gripped the side of the boat. But before Colletti could help them aboard, a savage gust shoved the *Big Fish* across the flooded street to the other side as mother and son desperately held on. The boat became lodged against a house, giving Colletti the chance to grab his neighbors.