

Photographer making his own happy family portrait a reality

August 29, 2010 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)
Author: Andrea Ball | Page: A11 | Section: MAIN
378 Words | Readability: Lexile: 820, grade level(s): 4 5

Dwayne Hills lost everything in Hurricane Katrina: photography equipment, furniture, clothes, keepsakes.

But it's the loss of his kids' baby pictures that bothers him the most.

"You can't get that back," the New Orleans native said. "They're just gone."

Hills, 39, has rebuilt his life. The Austin photographer - along with his wife, Melanie, and five children - has opened a studio for his commercial and portrait photography. He's also making a name for himself by taking pictures of Austin musicians, such as blues guitarist Seth Walker and jazz trumpeters Jeff Lofton and Ephraim Owen.

"Austin has been very good to us," Hills said. "We are fortunate. Austinites are very welcoming, especially the artists."

Five years ago, Hills was working at a parking garage in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck. He and Melanie, who was pregnant with their fourth child, rode out the storm at a downtown hotel, where they had gone in case their apartment flooded.

The next day, Hills saw the water rising.

"You could see water coming down the street, just gliding down the street," he said.

Hills and his family evacuated to Gonzales, La., and then came to Austin, where they had relatives. A friend offered Hills a web design job. Local nonprofit Any Baby Can gave the family diapers, formula, baby wipes, clothing and other things the children needed.

"It was hard at first," he said. "There was a lot of crying nights. A lot of 'Why is this happening? What is going on?'"

Hills buried himself in his burgeoning photography career, hanging out at the Elephant Room jazz club and taking pictures of the artists there. Eventually, he became a full-time photographer.

The hurricane changed his family, he said. The Hillses are prepared for emergencies, stocking their home with candles, batteries and other things they might need to weather a storm.

They also keep digital copies of all their pictures on servers that can be accessed in case their computer is ruined.

Hills is planning a fundraiser for Any Baby Can.

"The people were so welcoming and helped us," he said. "It's my way of giving back."

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Andrea Ball, AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF, 'Photographer making his own happy family portrait a reality', *Austin American-Statesman* (online), 29 Aug 2010 A11 <<https://www.austinlibrary.com:2114/apps/news/document-view?p=NewsBank&docref=news/131ECBDE5B6A2870>>

Caption:

Jay Janner AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Photographer Dwayne Hills plans to give back to Any Baby Can, an organization that helped him and **his family** when they first evacuated to Austin after Hurricane Katrina.

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