



## Goodnight room

### How Casey learned to sleep in Scary City

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Chris Rose

Like a lot of folks around here, Casey has had trouble sleeping at night since everything went down.

And like everyone else, the trouble started with the storm but, over time, it became layered with other issues. New Orleans issues. Sometimes scary, deadly things.

So she went to therapy to work through these issues.

Casey is my daughter's best friend. She is 8.

Do you ever get the feeling our kids are growing up different from everyone else?

Casey's story is unique in some ways but is also, sadly, the norm for so many in our midst, these Children of the Storm.

First, her house soaked in the brown water for a month. Everything on the first floor was destroyed. This, of course, puts her in league with more kids than not in this city.

But last fall, immediately after her family finished renovating, a burglar came in Casey's window one afternoon, rifled through the house and made off with her television and her sister's diamond ring.

It wasn't the theft that shook Casey as much as the invasion of her sanctuary. Kids spend their whole young lives scared of the things that aren't under their beds and in their closets, but this monster was real -- and it came in through her window.

And no matter how often you tell a kid that everything is all right, they know when it isn't.

Casey stopped sleeping in her room. She moved into the family guest room despite gentle urging from her parents to return to her room, to return to normalcy.

But Casey held firm. There were good nights and bad nights, but, either way, she stayed out of her room. "I thought there'd be a burglar in there," she told me.

On one of the bad nights, Casey went to her older sister's room and asked her to come lay down with her. Her older sister, Claire, told her to go away.

Casey pleaded. Claire grudgingly consented. She got out of her bed and went to the guest room with Casey. And she's lucky she did because while they slept in the guest room that night, the tornadoes of Feb. 13 swept through the city and one of them touched down on their house.

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"The roof came down and you could see the sky," Casey said.

When the family surveyed the damage, what they found was a load of bricks, mortar, tile and iron sitting on top of Claire's crushed bed, where she would have been had a burglar not spooked Casey out of her room several weeks before and set in motion this strange sequence of events.

"I kind of saved my sister's life," Casey said.

Indeed. However, this oddly fortuitous occurrence did little to restore Casey's peace of mind. An unholy alliance of nature and crime was taking its toll on the little girl. She was in a near-traumatized state. So Casey's parents went looking for help.

Or, as Casey put it: "I'm going to this thing. I don't know what it's called."

What it's called is Project LAST, a grief and trauma counseling program developed by the New Orleans Children's Bureau.

Project Last was designed in the 1990s specifically to deal with the emotional fallout of violent crime in the city, an intervention program to help kids deal with the very public carnage that is all-too-common and visible around here.

Some of the Children's Bureau counselors recently have adopted the program's methods to work with kids who appear to be floundering in the storm's wake. Casey enrolled in a 10-week session.

"We talk about the burglary, the tornado and the hurricane," Casey told me. "I write stories and draw pictures of my dreams and of how I felt when I was away from home for the hurricane."

I asked her: "Are they sad stories? Are they funny stories?"

"No," she said. "They're just stories about my life."

Casey's efforts from Project LAST are compiled in a workbook called "My Story," her book of dreams, fears, angers, memories and comforts. In it, she wrote a song called "Rainy Night:"

"I am in my bed with nobody beside me. The wind is blowing. I am scared. I look out of my window. I see lightning and rain. I hear thunder -- I just must go to sleep. I am tired. But I'm OK. I just want to be quiet."

Last Tuesday, in this season of graduations, Casey received a diploma from Project LAST. It was a small ceremony, attended by her parents, her sister and her counselor.

Casey read her book to her family. "Once we have talked about all that I have done in this book," reads one of its pages, "we will sign our names as a way of knowing that I am a brave, strong person."

And they had brownies and signed the book. And then Casey went home to get on with her life, on with her summer, a normal 8-year-old New Orleans kid with tragedy and therapy under her belt.

That night, she slept in her room.

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New Orleans and Jefferson Parish children 17 and under are eligible for enrollment in Project LAST, which is supported by the United Way and private donations. For more information or to enroll, donate or volunteer, call the Children's Bureau at (504) 525-2366.

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