

Home away from home

- News Tribune eReader
- 22 Dec 2017
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Rzyra, 7, and Rzai Denbow, 12, sit with their aunt Rachel Hurtault at the Boys & Girls Club of Jefferson City. Rzai and Rzyra and their aunt are originally from the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Croix. Rzai and Rzyra came to Jefferson City after their home in St. Croix was damaged by hurricanes.

The Boys & Girls Club becomes a home away from home for two children whose family has been effected by hurricane.

Editor's Note: For many charitable organizations, the holiday season, like the rest of the year, is a time to connect people in need to solutions to some of life's toughest problems. It's also a great time to look out for your neighbors. That's why, in the week leading up to Christmas, we're using our "A Christmas Wish" series to showcase community members whose lives have been enriched by the work of United Way of Central Missouri partner agencies and, by extension, generous community members.

One sibling wants to stay and the other wants to go, but together a hurricane-moved brother and sister for now find company at the local Boys & Girls Club.

Rzai and Rzyra Denbow are originally from the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Croix. The island dodged some of the damage Category 5 Hurricane Irma brought to neighboring St. John and St. Thomas, but the Denbows' home island wasn't so lucky two weeks later when a second Category 5 storm, Hurricane Maria, swept over Sept. 20.

The Denbows' aunt, Rachel Hurtault, is from St. Croix, too, but has lived in Jefferson City for the past 21 years. Her niece and nephew have been living with her since October, since Hurtault's brother, who works for an oil refinery on the island, managed to get a charter flight out for him and the children after mercy flights and a cruise ship full of people had already left.

The charter flight got Rzaï and Rzyra to Miami, Florida, and they got to Jefferson City by way of St. Louis.

It's not the first time Rzaï has visited Mid-Missouri, and he actually wants to stay here and has told his mom and dad as much. He said he enjoys his new friends here.

Mom and Dad are still on St. Croix in the family's hometown of Frederiksted, but it's not clear when Rzaï and Rzyra will be able to return.

Hurtault said the original plan was to have them stay with her in Jefferson City through the end of the current school year. However, she doesn't know how feasible a return at that point is, given the extent of damage to the island's infrastructure, especially its schools with water and wind damage.

CNN reported Dec. 4, 75 days after Maria hit, only about a quarter of St. Crucians had electricity, adding many homes remain without roofs and cellphone service is unreliable. Many people who work in the local economy's main industry of tourism remained out of work, and many have left for the U.S. mainland. Rzyra, 7, said she misses her dolls and dollhouse; she does want to go home.

Rzaï, 12, said he misses his big bed. He shares a bed now with 11-year-old cousin Ryan; and Rzyra shares with Ryan's twin sister, R'nylah.

Hurtault said her twins have attended the Boys & Girls Club of Jefferson City since they were in kindergarten, so she immediately contacted the club about enrolling Rzaï and Rzyra. Executive Director Stephanie Johnson expedited the normal admission process. "We always accept them with open arms," site coordinator Racquel Shipp said of children who come to the Boys & Girls Club under sudden, unexpected circumstances.

Shipp said having his cousins at the club with him has helped make Rzaï's transition easier.

Rzyra said she has liked meeting new friends at the club, and Rzaï said he likes going to The Linc next door to play sports; he plays power forward in basketball and just about everything in football.

Rzaï likes science and Rzyra likes math. Rzyra in particular is in luck because the club recently got a grant to expand its STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) programming to youth in grades K-5 at the Frank and Billie Railton Center and to students at Callaway Hills Elementary School. The grant money will purchase equipment, supplies and curriculum, as well as staff. Shipp said those new staff members will come to the club in January. The Boys & Girls Club also has a homework help and tutoring program; programs to help boys and girls navigate adolescence to become productive young men and women; substance abuse prevention programs; a gardening program; and targeted gang prevention outreach. The club also hosts Cub Scout Pack 72.

Rzaï and Rzyra planned to go to Atlanta, Georgia, for Christmas, where they'll be able to spend time with their dad.