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Hornets center feels obligation to get involved

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By John Reid

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Before a preseason game in October, Hornets center Tyson Chandler and his wife, Kimberly, embraced Wensanner King like a long lost family member.

They beamed with smiles when King introduced her daughter, grandchildren and other family members to the Chandlers. They hugged, posed for pictures and shared stories.

Tyson and Kimberly, however, did not mention to them that earlier in the day their home and property had burned in the wildfires that ravaged the San Diego area. The Chandlers went ahead with their plans to meet the King family of Algiers.

The King family, displaced by Hurricane Katrina, was one of the recipients of household goods and furniture offered in a giveaway that Kimberly helped organize with some of the wives of Hornets players.

"They were so friendly, so warm," King said. "I cried because they were so nice to us. Tyson kept saying I reminded him of his mother."

Chandler purchased his home in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., in 2006. Five acres burned, including a section of the house, during the wildfire. Chandler said insurance adjusters still are figuring out the total damages to the property that likely will exceed \$6 million.

"Guess what? We had a house that we were living in here, we had food, we had clothing on our backs and our toddler wasn't hurt," Kimberly said. "What we try to do is not put so much emphasis on material things. It's nice to have nice shoes, jeans, purses, but that doesn't define who we are and our character. We don't know why we are in this city, but we're here and there's tragedy. So we both feel like we've been called to help."

The Chandlers donated beds, appliances, furniture, televisions, even some of their wedding gifts, to families like the Kings.

Steve Martin, the Hornets' senior vice president of community investment and external affairs, said most of the donated items were used by Hornets players when they stayed at in Oklahoma City, the team's home the previous two seasons.

Kimberly came up with the idea to establish a giveaway after noticing all the boxes of items they had before moving to New Orleans.

"I asked myself, 'I can keep all this stuff, but am I really going to use it?' " Kimberly said. "Knowing what some of the people had gone through in New Orleans with Katrina, I knew I was going to donate these things. But my concern was that I wanted it to go to the right people that needed help."

The Hornets helped Kimberly and the other players' wives select needy families through the Housing Authority of New Orleans.

Although it did not flood in Algiers during Katrina, King said her home suffered wind damage, and she was forced to evacuate to Dallas, along with her daughter, who has three children.

King said she gave most of the donated items to her daughter, who has since returned to New Orleans. King told Chandler that she gave the big-screen television that Jannero Pargo and his wife, Malaysia donated, to her daughter. Chandler said he would give her another one to keep for herself.

"It was one of the most joyous days I can remember. They had me jumping up and down with happiness," King said. "I appreciate everything they've done. They are wonderful people."

A few days after Chandler made the promise, King said a deliveryman showed up with a big-screen TV.

"She is a very giving woman," Chandler said. "She was like I don't need any furniture, I want my daughter to have everything, and I thought she should have something for herself. So I gave her my television.

"She just reminds me of my mother. I remember the days growing up, when my mother would work two jobs and have to pick me up late from the baby sitter. I remember her crying, wishing she could do more for me on Christmas. Times like now, I'm in a more fortunate stage in my life. But I love to see people, when one person does something for another."

Before training camp began in New Orleans last season, Chandler toured the storm-ravaged Lower 9th Ward.

He passed some yards where only brick steps remained. He saw other yards completely vacant. No house. No trees. Definitely no people.

"I wanted to see reality, what they were not showing on television," Chandler said. "I went to the Lower 9th, and it was completely devastated. I saw blocks and blocks of where houses used to be. I just stood there, looked down and literally wanted to cry.

"I was picturing myself growing up as a kid, thinking what if this happened to me and everything was gone, including all my friends. This could happen to anybody. This happened in our country to our people. Everybody thinks they are untouchable, but this happened here. At that moment, it struck me that God placed us here for a reason. Guys like myself have to do what we can while we're here. We have to do something meaningful with a purpose to help people in need."

Last month, Chandler pledged his help to the Hoops for Homes program. The program now helps certified teachers in the metro area complete repairs on their storm-damaged homes. Chandler will donate \$100 for every rebound he grabs this season to help the initiative through his Rebound to Rebound program. Chandler also will appear in public service announcements to raise awareness for the program. So far, Chandler has pulled down 309 rebounds.

"A lot of guys say they want to do something, but he came with an idea and a plan," Martin said. "When a guy comes in with an entire plan, you know he's serious about getting things accomplished."

Chandler said he would not be in the NBA had it not been for teachers, particularly his coaches from grade school to high school.

When Molly McKinney was the first certified teacher in the program to be awarded a \$25,000 grant to complete the repairs of her damaged home, Chandler showed up to meet her.

"It seems like he really wants to help, and I told him to keep grabbing those rebounds," said McKinney, who spent a year teaching in Houston before returning to New Orleans to begin repairs on her home while living in a FEMA trailer.

"He's really excited about helping teachers, and that's good for the rebuilding of our city. I came back home because I missed New Orleans. I just can't thank Tyson enough."

Neither can the group of children from the New Orleans area in protective custody whom Chandler took on a Christmas shopping spree Sunday afternoon. There were no cameras, and Chandler reluctantly mentioned the event after a practice last week.

"We believe the more you give, the more you get back," Kimberly said. "We can't save the world. We can't save New Orleans. But we can do what we can and that makes a difference."

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