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Hurricane Katrina: The First Night at Reunion

Donna Valentino

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I returned to college Spring '05, after a 22 year hiatus. When I attempted to reenter the workforce, I was told that without recent work experience or recent college enrollment—I had no job skills.

Previous college credit in Business Management, years of work experience, extensive volunteer activities, typing 60wpm, just didn't make me 'marketable.'

I enrolled at Collin County last spring looking for something different.

My reentry class was the Learning Community Criminal Justice and American History combo. My interest in Criminal Justice serendipitously led me to an internship with Collin County.

As the Intern for the Collin County Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC), a grant from the State, my job was to create public information pieces outlining the role of the Committee. Other assigned duties included working in the County Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

during a two day, multi-disaster drill coordinated by Homeland Security and the Strategic National Stockpile Bio-terrorism Exercise in Frisco. One of the many people

I was fortunate to meet on the LEPC was the Emergency Services Coordinator for the American Red Cross.

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In June, I joined the **Red Cross** local **Disaster Action Team**. Local usually means house and apartment fires. I took as **many** classes as I **could** schedule to learn how to **work** a local event.

Monday, August 29th, I was fully activated:

I picked up the 'kit' containing the Red Cross's cell phone and waited. That afternoon my husband and I sat and watched events unfold in New Orleans in high-definition awe as by the minute, the situation deteriorated.

Wednesday, August 31st, I was in the McKinney Red Cross office watching evacuees stream into the building looking for assistance. Clearly, 'we' were not expecting nor prepared for what would follow. While still in the office, at 3pm I received a call from Dallas Red Cross on my personal cell phone—not their phone, asking that I come to Reunion Arena that night to work 11pm-7am; they were turning Reunion Arena into a shelter. My coordinator was stunned, as that was the first she heard. McKinney staffers were referring people as we spoke, to a shelter on Harry Hines in Dallas that was no longer open. It became quite apparent there were several evacuees in Collin County. Calls started coming in that hundreds were stranded in East Texas along the state line. The McKinney office received calls from evacuees in Tyler who ran out of gas on the Interstate.

I made it to Reunion Arena after my evening History class. Pulling into the parking lot, the first thing I noticed was the intense police presence. Once inside, signed in, I tried to get up to speed as soon as possible. The first thing I heard, was "be prepared, this could go on for 16 weeks; we could be here through Christmas."

That first evening was okay; the next morning—that's another story. We were set-up for 300 and had 225-240 by my estimate. There were several staying in their cars out in the parking lot; those who would not leave their pets or did not care for the 'openness' of the arena floor.

The first evacuees I met were two boys in their late teens, who after lights-out were still "not sleepy." They were funny and entertaining; one in particular caught everyone's eye with the gigantic, air-brushed, glow in the dark, marijuana leaf t-shirt; he was a big kid and it was a big shirt. He certainly had the attention of every officer on-site. I even helped them obtain special permission to step outside for a cigarette. The security guard, an outside officer, and I joked with them, "Okay, okay, if that's the only thing you're smoking." We spoke briefly about how bad things were in New Orleans and they sure didn't expect to end up here. One of the teens remarked "we really appreciate it; y'all didn't have to do this for us. I never been to Texas before, y'all are real nice." We thanked them in kind and told them it was our pleasure. I watched them take the massive stairs back down to the arena floor.

Next I assisted in checking a family that had just arrived from Houston. The dad, mother, an ill, elderly, wheel-chair bound grandmother, and their two teens arrived about midnight. I escorted them down to the floor of Reunion and showed them to a cluster of cots where they could remain together and grandma had easier wheelchair access. I ran back and forth for supplies, showed them the snack table, and pointed out the restrooms. I escorted them up and back several times; in our elevator rides, the dad told me they evacuated from the West Bank. It took them hours to make it to Beaumont; the hotel tripled their rate when they discovered they were from Louisiana. When they heard on the radio the Astrodome was open for evacuees, they headed there. Upon arrival at the Astrodome, they were told they could not shelter there until all the people in the Superdome had been moved to the Astrodome.

I escorted them down to the floor of Reunion and showed them to a cluster of cots where they could remain together and grandma had easier wheelchair access.

Their credit cards were maxing out and cash was running low. Grandma was not doing so well; as the dad put it, the stress was “messaging with her diabetes.” The family ended up at Reunion because they heard over the car radio Reunion was a shelter. I asked him how long it took him to get to Dallas; he had driven 27 hours. As I shook my head and pondered their position, I had no idea that within a week’s time I would know that this family would be one of the luckier ones.

At around 1 a.m., I watched as a woman made her way through the upstairs entrance—a petite woman, about my age, carrying an obviously exhausted small boy; he was out cold. You could tell by his face he was young, but he was stout. The woman explained that she had just made it in from New Orleans; one of the other volunteers offered to take the sleeping boy from her arms while she filled out paperwork, but she politely refused. The volunteer filled out the forms for her, while mom repeatedly shifted the boy’s weight and repositioned his head, obviously worn out by the load she was bearing. Just before going downstairs, she looked at me and asked if I could see if her teenage son was in our shelter. The other volunteer pointed me to a box with loose sheets and binders from the other shelters that were moved to the arena (I didn’t know there were shelters opened the previous weekend). I looked for her teen’s name, while she told the small group of volunteers gathered how her 19 year old son had gone off with his best friend and his wife to check on her family after the hurricane. The mom had not seen him since; she couldn’t reach him by cell phone, but they intermittently text messaged each other. Last she heard, they were going to Houston or Dallas. I turned to her and told her I was sorry; we didn’t have his name listed. As we walked to the elevator, we discussed teenaged boys in general (I have one the same age myself). As we walked the halls of the backstage area of the arena, I jokingly pointed out that Mick Jagger and basketball greats walked down these same halls—it only got a little smile.

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As I led her into the area of cots I thought best for her and her son, she decided to take a short-cut between two sleeping mounds, covered in blankets. Just as she was trying to tip-toe in, and still hang onto her son, I thought she completely tripped over a cot and fell. I turned back toward her, when a young man under the blankets popped up. I cannot describe the looks on both their faces as he reached up to catch her—she tripped over her son’s best friend! As the best friend reached over and started shaking the son, she finally balanced on both feet, her eyes welled with tears, still clutching the sleeping boy. Unable to awake the son, the best friend began pounding him, shouting, “Dude! Dude! Your mom!”

I stood there not sure what I was watching; these were the same two guys goofing around with us upstairs earlier! The son finally raised up, looked at his mother, blinked twice, fell face down, and went back to sleep. The mom shook her head, spoke with the best friend briefly and quickly took the cot across the aisle at the foot of her older son’s cot. I asked if she needed anything, she smiled and said, “No thanks;” she was just tired. I watched as the *still sleeping* 5 year old son was placed on the cot; mom curled up around him and pulled the blanket over both their heads. I turned and walked to the dock area, picking up towels, hygiene kits, snacks, and a juice pack. I left the items piled on the empty cot next to the sleeping mother and son. I walked past them several times throughout the early morning hours. They never moved.

The only way I can describe the next morning after breakfast is that I now have some idea what it was like at the fall of Saigon.

I worked in the EOC again when Governor Perry declared a State of Emergency enabling County Judge Ron Harris to declare the same in Collin County. I watched for two days the massive undertaking to open shelters; what I witnessed was amazing. It would be six weeks after Katrina before I worked at the Red Cross Service Center processing Katrina and Rita evacuees and distributing debit cards.