

Voices From New Orleans

These two excerpts were part of larger works sent by listeners to my radio program. They tell unforgettable tales about Hurricane Katrina. The first person is a resident of New Orleans; the other a physician. The first excerpt is lifted from an instant message conversation; the second from an e-mail sent by the physician to his coworkers in Virginia. The first excerpt ends with a reference to Charity Hospital—the same hospital at which, ironically, the physician was volunteering.

“You wouldn't believe New Orleans. 40,000 homes in St. Bernard Parish are under water. All of the big hotels' windows blew. The Superdome was damaged from flying debris.

“All of St. Charles Parish had to evacuate. Dee, you wouldn't believe New Orleans, the large malls are destroyed, the highways, like Williams, Veterans, etc. are under 3 feet of water. The mayor said: ‘New Orleans is closed.’ No one can get back. State police are turning them around.

“The yachts and sailboats are on top of each other at the lakefront and the yacht club is on fire from a gas leak, they think. Seems strange to see fire coming up from a flood. All water in New Orleans is contaminated. Hazmat warnings are up. I-10 has major problems. I don't know what will happen to New Orleans, it won't ever be the same I'm sure. Too much has been lost.

“Bodies floating in the water, significant loss of lives. I wish the world could see what has happened there. People are being pulled from the water; dead bodies into the boats. The quarter wasn't destroyed. How's that for irony?

“Do you know how big Charity Hospital is? Windows blown out, water on each floor, people are dying because they can't be sent by EMS to other hospitals. They don't know when EMS can get them out, no oxygen, no power. It's horrible.”

From the physician at Charity Hospital:

“During the storm, windows blew out in the ICU, flooding it with about 2 inches of water. The power went out, but the emergency generators kicked on and all seemed well. But an hour later, for some unknown reason, we lost all power and began bagging our patients in total darkness. We were able to restart the backup generators late in the day on Monday, which allowed us to start cleaning up the mess in the ICU . . . when the emergency generators went out again . . . we began to understand why: water was pouring into downtown New Orleans from every direction and had flooded the generators that we located on the first floor.

“Without power for our life support systems (suction, monitors, vents, dialysis, IV fluid pumps, radiology, laboratory, etc.), we realized that we needed to get our patients out ASAP. Before we lost communication with the outside world, FEMA instructed us to prepare for evacuation later that day (Tuesday), and to our surprise, the Governor's office was telling news agencies we had already been evacuated. Needless to say, no outside help came until Friday.

“The Chief of Tulane Pulm/CCN paddled a canoe from Charity to find a National Guard 5-ton truck with a driver that was not in communication with his command. This actually worked to our advantage since he could not be accused of disobeying an order by helping us. Wednesday night we put the first four of our patients in the back of the truck and drove them across the street to Tulane Hospital's parking garage.

“We then used a ‘borrowed’ pick truck to ferry the patients to the roof top where we set up a mini ICU for the next 2 days. After removing light poles, helicopters were able to begin landing,

but the sun set before we could get any ICU patients to the roof, leaving us with 4 patients and no exit strategy. . . . By 11 pm, Wednesday, the clap-clap thunder of a Black Hawk was heard overhead. The Black Hawks were configured only as troop carriers, which meant that we would have to provide patient support for all of the sorties. The first ride for me was surreal: moonless night, unlit buildings and towers, pilots with night vision goggles. A triage landing site had been established on the edge of town on the interstate. Amazingly, there were thousands of people waiting, ready to help, but no one had known of our plight.

“We continued the air evacuation all day Thursday, Thursday night, and Friday morning. Not knowing the structural integrity of the roof top, the Black Hawk pilots stayed powered up while we loaded our patients, doctors, and O2 cylinders. . . . By Friday afternoon we had completed our mission and walked the three blocks back to Charity in chest deep sewage just in time to discover that FEMA had arrived to begin evacuating our hospital.

“I cried when I left Charity, perhaps for the last time ever. Some were tears of triumph; some were tears of profound sadness. Triumph for the miracle of human resolve that allowed a group of civilian doctors, nurses, and respiratory therapists to accomplish what the Federal government could not. . . . The sadness is felt because valuable time was lost both due to the anemic early response and because valuable resources were misused. I personally witnessed dozens and dozens of helicopters—many military—land and fly away with able-bodied citizens while patients died on the roof top. And, sadly, many of those able-bodied citizens were physicians. It was an experience that I will never forget.

“I left with one memento: a set of keys of a John Doe with an unknown medical condition that we loaded into a helicopter to be carried to an unknown place with an uncertain future.

“If you received a John Doe looking for his keys, let me know, I'd love to one day be able to return them.”

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