

Too Much Disaster Going On

By Andrea Favalora and Norman M. Goldfarb

Andrea Favalora, a licensed midwife, became a clinical research coordinator in 1992. In 1996, she started her own clinical research business, New Orleans Clinical Trial Management. After selling the business in 2004, she joined Benchmark Research to open a new research site in Metairie, Louisiana, just outside the New Orleans city limits. She is 5'7", lean, 49 years old, energetic, sociable, with short, straight brown hair. In August, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. This is her story.

Prelude

On Friday night, August 26th, Hurricane Katrina was headed towards Florida. But, by the time I woke up on Saturday morning, the hurricane was moving towards New Orleans. Local government officials had called for a voluntary evacuation, but by noon on Saturday, it was mandatory to leave the city because the storm was a category 5, or pretty close to it, and it was headed straight for us. I packed my bags with enough clothes for a few days. My plans were to go to Austin, Texas, where Benchmark is headquartered. My son was in California on business. My daughter was in her home near the lake; I was trying to convince her to leave. She finally left for Atlanta but not until Sunday afternoon.

My mother was the biggest problem. She was 85 at the time. Short, frail, thin, gray hair, and she's just a character in herself. I went over to her nursing home around noon. She was at Colonial Oaks, on Ithaca Street, between West Esplanade and Veteran's Highway in Metairie, about 10 minutes west of the New Orleans city limits.

Colonial Oaks is a one-story, brick building with a flat roof. It's set back about six feet behind the sidewalk. You open the gate and walk through a patio. There's a small garden at the back with a fountain, behind a low wrought-iron gate. There is a parking lot on the left. Turn right, open the front door, and you are in the right front corner of the building. Straight ahead is the dining room and then the kitchen behind that. Turn left, and you run into the nurses' station. Turn left again to the big entertainment room. The residents' rooms are in two long rows, running along the back wall of the building and down the middle.

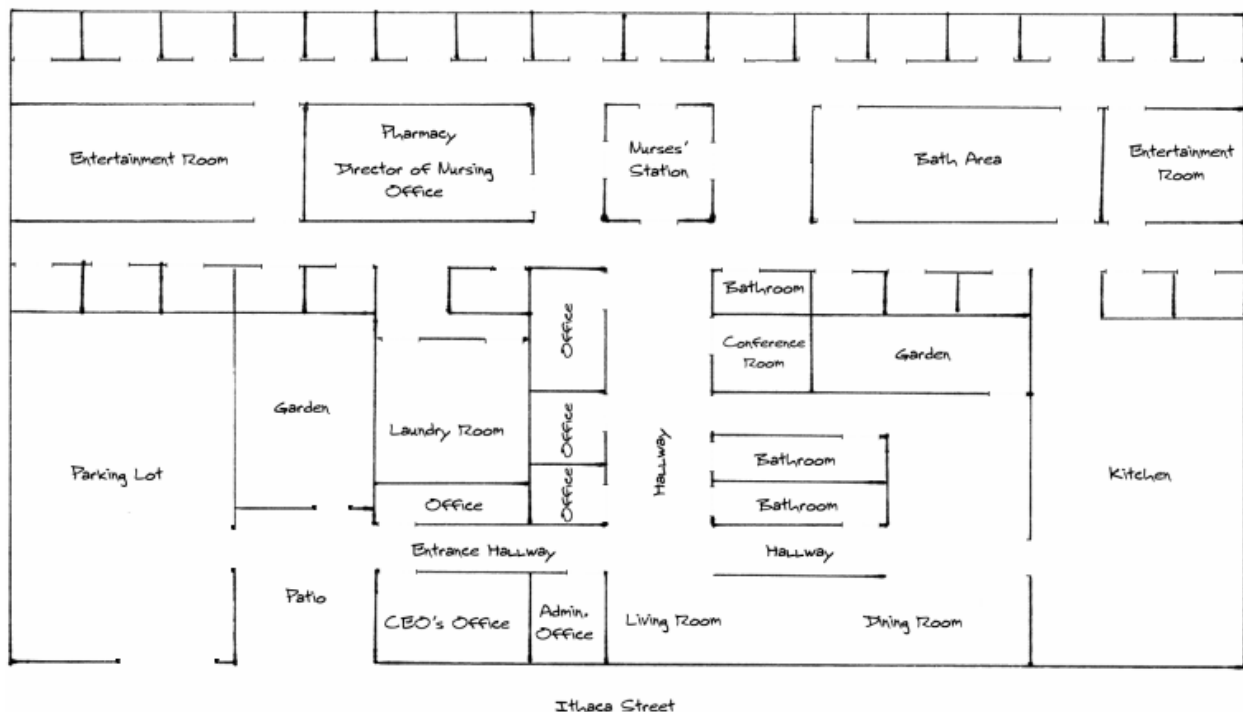
They were waiting for buses to move the residents. They expected the buses to arrive around 6:00 PM on Saturday, and leave around 8:00 AM.

I went back home and moved some things around. I picked up a computer from the floor, just in case it flooded. I put my suitcase and dog food, some cash and important legal documents in the back of my SUV. I expected to leave town for just a day or two. I believed in my heart that the storm would change its course at the last hours and we would all come back home. I never expected my house to flood, so I did not move pictures or other things that were close to the floor. New Orleanians are asked to evacuate several times a hurricane season and everyone returns in a few days.

I went back to the nursing home in the evening. The buses didn't show up, but the CEO and Director of Nursing both assured me that by 6:00 AM Sunday morning they would be there. The nursing home company was headquartered in Dallas; they were the ones providing the evacuation. I went home and spent the night. At about 5:45 AM, when I got up, the hurricane was just huge; it was almost the size of the entire Gulf of Mexico and it was

headed straight for New Orleans. They were saying, "This is catastrophic, get out!" The Parish President of Metairie was telling people "Get out. If you don't leave, get an ax, put it in your attic and leave your attic open because you are going to be up there. The water will come in if there is a 20 foot surge; the levies are not high enough." I went back to the nursing home about 6:00 AM. The buses had not arrived. I was told at that point that they were not coming.

Colonial Oaks Nursing Home



They were going to move the residents to the hospital, about 50 yards away, across the street. Then, at 7:00 AM, they cancelled that plan. The hospital was not going to take any DNRs – Do Not Resuscitates. I don't know if all of the residents were DNRs, but a lot of them were.

I told the Director of Nursing that I could stay, that I was experienced in medicine, could do vitals, feed the residents, and help, but that I had three dogs – Sherlock, Roxie and Abbey – and the dogs would have to come with me. The CEO and Director of Nursing agreed because some of the employees had not shown up for work and they might need me. I put my dogs in a conference room, filled up their bowls with food and water, closed the door, and begin helping with the residents. Our first task was to move the residents out of their rooms and into the hallway and big entertainment room because the winds were picking up and we were afraid of the glass in the windows breaking and hurting someone. At this point, no one really knew what was going on. We were just waiting for the storm to hit.

The staff included the CEO, the Director of Nursing, an RN, two cooks, a maintenance man, and two certified nursing assistants (CNAs). I don't know how many staff didn't show up. There were two other family members: a woman who cared for her mother and a man who cared for his mother. One of the girls who worked there, she came with three or four women and about fifteen children between the ages of one and sixteen. There were probably 10 or 12 adults actually working.

There were 79 elderly residents, very old, definitely very needy. One was my mother. One wing of residents were pretty debilitated; they had to be fed. Another wing of residents were wheelchair-bound and bed-bound. There were two, maybe three people who could physically walk with a walker.

About half had good cognition. Half were very concerned about what was going on and questioning me and wanting to talk to their children and find out where they were going to go, what was going to happen. They wanted to be with their kids. It was confusion, mass confusion. About half could feed themselves. We could bring their meals, which were very basic: salami sandwiches, canned ravioli, heated up.

Sunday went pretty fast because the storm was supposed to hit Monday morning at 8:00 AM. There were no windows in the hallway and we shut the bedroom doors. We had a big screen TV. We were watching everything that was happening in the city. People were being brought to the Super Dome. Everybody else was stuck on the highway.

I talked to my daughter at 7:00 that night. She was on the bridge, stuck, over Lake Ponchartrain, trying to get out of the city. That was the last time I talked to her for weeks. My daughter-in-law and my one-year-old grandbaby were headed to Florida; they were past the traffic and in good shape. My son got in a car to drive back to New Orleans from California. He was stopped in Houston. His house ended up in eight feet of water. His wife made it with the baby to Florida.

Hurricane

On Sunday, at around 5:00 in the evening, I took my dogs for a walk because once the storm started coming inland I wouldn't be able to do that. It was pretty windy, gusting about 30 or 40 miles per hour. At 7:00 PM, I went outside to walk them again, but it was way too windy. The wind was pushing me around the street; things were beginning to blow off buildings. It was no longer safe. There was some rain. I didn't go for any more walks after that.

At 9:00 PM, we lost electricity. The generator turned on and sconces lit up on the walls. The wind was so bad. There were some spare single-sized mattresses. We leaned them up against the windows in the front and put the big craft tables up against the mattresses, then the draperies drawn over that to try to keep the glass from coming in if a window broke. We couldn't see outside very easily.

There was a small generator with a few days of fuel for lights on the wall and some red plugs for residents on oxygen. The refrigerator in the kitchen was hooked up and an ice maker. It was dim, but you could see. We were pretty snug in there.

By 2:00 in the morning, the rain was coming down so hard that it was pouring over the top of the big gutters. Rain was pouring into the garden and the pump would clog up. Monroe, the mechanic, would go out there in the rain and clean it. The water would drain again, but that stopped when the street filled up. Monroe's a good-looking black man, in his fifties, from New Orleans. Just a really nice guy and worked, worked, worked.

I didn't see anybody resting except the CEO. He looks like Kojak, but taller and fatter. Close to sixty years old, wore glasses and smoked cigarettes. He hadn't been through a hurricane before and I think he was just plain scared. He stood still with his arms at his sides and didn't move the entire time. He was not involved in the care of the residents. He stayed in his office, which was flooded. Once the evacuation was happening, he started functioning.

The Director of Nursing worked hard the entire time. She was the one with leadership. She was a very conservative, thin, white woman, short hair, 45-50 years old, held herself together. She was in Desert Storm.

The cooks were amazing. There was one cook, a black woman, in her forties, really sweet and very quiet. I don't know who the second cook was. But this woman, she was dedicated. She just stayed in the kitchen and made sure all of the residents were fed. But I don't remember eating the entire four days.

One of the CNAs was there with her two-year-old. She was really, really sweet. She was in her thirties. She worked non-stop trying to keep the residents clean and fed. I kept looking at her and she was looking at me and there was a lot of language going on between us. She was very concerned about her husband and her other children because they stayed at their house where the flooding had gone up to the roofs and she could not communicate with them. I don't remember the other nursing assistant.

The rain was unbelievable. When the garden started to back up with water, it started running into the patio, and then into the front door and started filling up the front of the building. So Monroe and I got out there and, from 2:00 in the morning until 7:00, we swept the water away from the door with squeegee brooms. We swept and swept and swept until an old lady in a wheelchair suggested that we put some of the wet blankets in plastic bags and build a levee in front of the door. That solved that problem. We still had water in the building, but not much, just at the front. Monroe was vacuuming water out of the building with a wet-vac. The other garden flooded, but not so bad.

Then it was just crazy. Trees were flying around. I would go out on that little patio, which was protected and the wind was so intense. It would push me all around. I was watching pieces of air conditioning units come off the tops of buildings and fly down the street. Branches and whole trees were blowing down the street. Then our telephone service went out. Occasionally, the telephone would ring and I could hear people say something and I would say "Help us!" but it would just click off. My cell phone no longer worked, but, for some unknown reason, somehow I got four phone calls from Mark Lacy at Benchmark. He said later that he had to redial about 200 times to get through each time. Now we had no electricity, no gas, no telephone. The sewer was backing up through the toilets; it was disgusting. Sunday night was the last time we had running water. After that, there were five 5-gallon jugs of water for 100 people. We rationed it. We had some bottles of oxygen, but not enough. We rationed that too. One lady said, "I need my oxygen!" and we just said, "No you don't."

We fed the residents three meals a day. We fed them salami sandwiches twice. One meal was ravioli. I have to give credit to the cooks. For what we were living through, they really focused on the food. There was an RN, a white gay guy, fortyish, who was incredible. He just kept going all day and all night giving meds.

The hurricane hit around 8:00 Monday morning. Around 9:00 or 9:30, it got really quiet. I knew we were in the eye. Then about an hour later, everything broke loose. The wind and the rain and everything came right back, winds like I had never seen in my life; it was unbelievable. It just beat us up until about 1:00 in the afternoon. It was the first time in my life that I had seen it raining up. The wind was so crazy that the rain was going up. I watched things flying off the hospital across the street, I watched the transformer on the hospital blowing up and it looking like fireworks. I saw trees blowing down the streets, entire trees with trunks and leaves. The light that hangs outside the front door came down and crashed and broke. All of the residents were in a panic. Everybody needed something and there weren't enough people to provide those needs.

The storm slowed down about 1:00 PM, but I didn't know what was going on. The only station that we could get on TV had lost its transmission. There was a small radio, so I got some news on the radio. A woman had got through to the radio station on her cell phone and she said "I'm in my attic. I have an eight-year-old and a five-month-old and the water is up to my neck." I don't know how she was holding these two kids and calling on the

phone. She was begging somebody to come get her out of her attic. She gave her address. It was on North Robinson Street not far from the lake. It was at that point that I became aware that something big and bad was going on. There was one phone call after another of people begging this radio station to get help to them. Then we lost that station.

Flood

Monday afternoon was the last time we were on some sort of schedule, taking care of people, cleaning them, changing them. It just all fell apart. Tuesday morning at about 7:00, I went outside and I could see the water getting deeper and deeper and coming over the top from a waterway about a block away. I could see the water coming towards us and then the water came in the building. I had in my mind that it was going to come in the front door, but it just came in from every corner, the front, the back, the side, wherever there was a wall. At first we tried to get it out, but eventually we quit trying and we were just walking around in it. It was about ankle-deep. The nursing home is not that much higher than the street and I couldn't figure out why it stayed a lot lower than the street water.

My dogs were in a conference room. I found two plastic sofas from the patio and put the dogs on them. I got a sheet and dried them off. The dogs did not leave those sofas the entire time. One person who was staying with her mother got angry with me because I was trying to get the water out of the room with the dogs. She said that that's the last thing that I should have been doing. But it was some sort of escape for me for fifteen minutes.

There was a guy there with his mother. He kept demanding that I help his mother as if I was an employee. I didn't fit into the category of employee but I was working the whole time. Yet I have very little memory of taking care of the residents except for my mother.

About 9:00 AM, I got one of my lucky phone calls from Mark Lacy. He said the levees had broken and we had to get out of there. But the water was too deep. There was a National Guardsman out in the water and it was up to his hips. I was afraid, with the glass and electric wires that had fallen and everything, to go out there. You can't walk through water very long without getting pruned skin. Walking around with shoes rubbing against your feet doesn't help. I ditched my shoes and was barefoot. The water would run up the legs of your jeans and they got heavy and would hurt your legs, so I put on my frilly pink pajama bottoms because they were short and light. They didn't get wet.

The mattresses were still against the windows and the drapes were still drawn. It stayed just as it was. We were in a panic mentality. One of the resident's rooms was open and I could see a light. I went back there and saw that the house behind us was on fire. The flames were shooting way up in the air. I got Monroe and brought him back there. He said, "This whole block is going to blow because of all of the chemicals in the water from the cars and products in garages and under sinks." At that point, it was probably very early Tuesday morning, with the water in the building and the building behind us on fire, no phones to call anybody, I just had the feeling of "I can't do anything to help myself." I really lost it. I felt like I lost my sanity, I lost my intellect. I couldn't think. I was scared. I wanted to leave. I wanted out. I just wanted out. I couldn't think.

A little later, Mark Lacy got through again on his cell phone. I said, "The building is on fire; there's water in the building." He sent an email to everybody that he could possibly find to call CNN, to call the National Guard, call the police. At some point, I heard a truck. I went out and it was a fire truck. The water was above their wheels. They lifted the truck up on these stilts and it made a lot of noise. The truck came up out of the water. Guys climbed on top and dropped down to their underwear, changed into rubber suits, and jumped into the water with hoses and put the flames out. I thanked them, but it was like I wasn't paying

attention while they were doing it. Ordinarily you would stand there and watch them put the whole fire out. But I kept leaving and coming back. I was very confused.

Then I went up to the nurses' station and the Director of Nursing. I walked up to her and I started crying and I said "We've made a mistake staying here and we've got to get out!" She just looked at me. She said "Stop it! Get a grip! Don't think about what could have happened and don't think about what might happen. Stay in the now and focus on these residents and let's try to get them taken care of and fed. That's all you have to focus on. Don't focus on anything else." She had experience in disasters, so I listened to her and did exactly what she said. I was on autopilot.

With some of the people in there, we discussed what would we do about the residents if the water kept getting higher and higher. I was angry that I was put in the position, not so much by the nursing home, almost by God, where I had to decide if I was going to exit a building that was flooding to save myself and leave 79 elderly people to drown. It was beyond my human capacity. One of the people said, "Your mother and the other residents, they would want all of the young people to get out." After that, I got my mother out of her bed. I moved her into the wheelchair and closer to the front door. My mom was a swimmer as a young woman, but she doesn't walk, so I didn't know if she could swim. But if it got deep enough, I was going to try to haul her across the street to the hospital ramp.

Surviving

Right after the storm, one of the women who had children got angry because of the way things were in the nursing home. Several of the women left in the water with all of the children, except the CNA's two-year-old. One of the children had asthma. They took off in that dirty water. I don't know what happened to them.

People were crying for their crucifixes, for their rosaries, to get comfortable. One man was crying that his legs hurt and to help him. When the building caught fire next door, we rolled most of their beds into the dining room and the living room so, if someone came to evacuate us, it would be easier to roll them out. But when we lined them up, there wasn't room for aisles between the beds, so people were locked up in corners and you just couldn't get to them. Things were just starting to fall apart. We hadn't slept in two days. We were in a state of panic. I knew the levees had broken and the city was filling up to the rooftops, but I didn't know what would happen to us.

The air was so stagnant in there and it was hot; it was over one hundred degrees. We were walking in water, so it was unbelievably humid. We kept the windows closed because they opened at the bottom and the screens had popped off and we were afraid of snakes. The windows were closed, the doors were closed, and it was just unbelievably hot.

One man was gasping for air and turning colors. Blood was coming out of his mouth. I had brought three fans from home. I plugged them into a red outlet and pointed one at him. He looked better, but then he started gasping again and then he just quit breathing and died. They covered him up with a sheet. After the man died, there was a different feeling. It was so gloomy. What were we going to do with the body? Where was his family?

Opening the windows would have required intellectual thought. We were just taking care of the residents. A lot of helicopters were flying back and forth, black and green ones. Tuesday morning, I saw a fat man come out of the hospital for a smoke, but he was too far away. He waved at me and went back in the building. To this day, I wonder why I didn't swim across the street and go to the hospital. Since the hurricane, I've talked to doctors that worked in the hospital. They asked me, "Why didn't you come over?" That takes intellectual thought. It's like when you are almost in a car wreck and you panic. You are not thinking how you should do this or that. It's afterwards that you think, "Oh, thank God, I slammed on my

brakes." You have that intellectual thought afterwards. The hospital people said they didn't know we were there; they thought the building was evacuated.

After the man died, I checked the ice machine. It was still continuing to make a little ice, but it was contaminated, so we couldn't use it for drinks. I put ice in garbage bags and was putting them on my mother and this old guy that was beside her and this other lady who was really, really hot. I was packing them in ice. I wasn't thinking about 80 people getting ice. It was about what was in front of me at the time. There would be hours before I could get back to my mother because I was cleaning vomit off one resident, or trying to find a Rosary or a Crucifix, or giving someone a drink, or helping someone with their diaper, or to go to the bathroom. The residents that normally use the toilet did not want to pee in their diapers even though they had them on. There was a routine that they had and they wanted to continue it, but it was total chaos. It was just total chaos.

Evacuation

The CEO called us together Tuesday afternoon on the patio and said headquarters was working on an evacuation plan. They didn't know if there would be room on the buses for me and the two other family members that were there. It scared me. He didn't give us any details and I didn't ask any questions because I was too traumatized. There was discussion that I would have to turn my dogs loose. The dogs had been in water for days and unfed because the flood soaked their food. I thought, "That is so unfair!" I went in and I told my mom. We went back to taking care of residents, taking care of things that were happening, being wet. My feet were swollen; skin was coming off my heels and the tops of my feet. There was no bathroom; there was no shower. You would just go to the bathroom in the overflowing toilet or the trashcan. Most of us were dehydrated from no water and from the heat.

At one point on Tuesday night, I went outside and I was looking around. When I came back in, I realized how bad it stunk and what kind of situation we were in. It's like when you walk out of your house and then back in and you smell cooking. You think, "It smells so good in here!" Like that but the opposite. I realized that if we didn't get out of there more people were going to die because it was too hot and wet and gross.

I was outside walking around the building about 2:00 in the morning. The water had receded some. I heard a noise like a bus. I walked around to the front and there was a Trailways bus. I ran inside to tell everyone. A man came in. I said "Is that a bus?" and he said "It's a bus." I asked him, "Are you a bus driver?" He said, "No, I'm a State Representative and I brought you a bus. My name is Cleo Fields. We have two more buses coming to get you." I was so full of gratitude. I can't begin to tell you how I felt; I was so excited. Then I ran outside to the bus.

The driver said there were two more buses trying to get through behind him. They had come from Arkansas. His door was open and the air conditioning was just pouring out. I felt that cold air and I seriously considered taking the bus myself and getting the hell out of Dodge because I had had enough. Just taking off. The driver was walking into the front of the building. He turned around and went back and closed the door of the bus. I don't know if it was because of the air conditioning or because he saw me checking it out. I heard after that that someone had hijacked a bus. I knew the mentality that was involved with that. I understood that.

The other two buses showed up about a half hour later. One of the drivers said the water was so high in Metairie, they almost turned back.

I went inside and I told my mother that the buses were there and we were leaving; we were being evacuated and that I needed to pack her things. I went into her room and her dresser

was wet; all of her clothes were wet. I went outside and I asked, "The clothes are wet; what do we do?" The driver looked at me and said, "We're not packing! We're putting the residents on the bus and we're leaving!"

The water was receding quickly; I don't know how deep it was. Apparently the Parish turned on pumps, so every minute it was receding. About 18 people suddenly showed up from the hospital. They were in clean, crisp scrubs; they were young and fresh, mostly in their twenties. The street was still wet, and they were so clean, so they must have come over in trucks. I followed some of them into the building and they said, "Oh my God! Oh my God!" I looked past them; it's 3:00 in the morning; it's dark, and I saw a sea of people laying on beds looking like they were so close to death.

The volunteers picked the residents up on the sheets they were laying on, put them on boards or just carried them onto the buses. There were some broken hips from the moving. Most of the people were fragile, very, very fragile. Some of them were kind of big, but we got everybody on the bus. The dead person stayed. We left two cats, so I filled up their food bowl and a big bowl of water, but the cats didn't make it, I heard. There was a big fish tank and I heard that they didn't make it either. I grabbed a cockatiel in its cage and put it in the compartment underneath the bus. My mother wanted to stay at the nursing home; that's where she lived. She didn't want to go to Shreveport because they are Baptist and they don't believe in Happy Hour.

I couldn't take my dogs on the bus; I was very upset. I had taken care of these people for days and now I was being told I had to cut my dogs loose. The city was flooded; the city was evacuated; I was getting more stories from the bus drivers; there are looters; the levees broke; it's a total catastrophe; and I had to leave and I couldn't take my dogs. Then one of the bus drivers said, "I understand your love for your animals. I couldn't ask you to do that. When the first bus goes, you get in your SUV and follow directly behind him and I'll get directly behind you, and we'll cut through the water."

We went out fine. There was so much debris. We were rolling over lights and signals; really hitting hard and flying up on one tire. The highway was unrecognizable. It looked destroyed. When we got onto I-10, there were so many trees on the side of the road and so much damage that I didn't recognize the landmarks. But I was so tired and I was in that air-conditioned car and, luckily, I had a full tank of gas. I had money, so I wasn't worried about that. But I was barefoot; I had no clothes; and I had three dogs. I followed those buses for hours and hours and hours.

First we got to Baton Rouge and waited until noon. They were trying to get us into a shelter there, but there wasn't room. I fell asleep in my car for four hours. It was Wednesday morning and that was my first sleep since Saturday night. I tried to sleep on the conference table but there was just too much disaster going on. I was afraid the water was going to come up. I was afraid that something bad – worse – was going to happen.

Then we went to Jonesborough, near Shreveport. We drove up around 4:30 PM. There were probably 50 people standing outside. Between 2:00 in the morning and 4:30 in the afternoon they had put together a nursing home. It was amazing. It was called Pine Hill. It used to be a nursing home but it closed down when they built a new one. It was a one-story cinder block building. When we arrived, they had trays with slices of cake. They had a kitchen set up and they were cooking. All of these church people were there. Kids, sixteen years old, were giving water to the residents. It was touching. When we arrived, they were all crying. I heard later that we just looked so sad when we arrived. I was in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms and no shoes and hadn't had a bath in four days.

Some of the people wanted rosaries. One of the local women was there who rode in Mardi Gras parades with the Centurians. She had planned on doing a garage sale, so she had

beads in her trunk. She gave them to me and I handed them out as rosaries and they were happy.

Twenty-six of the residents died at the shelter. Twenty-six of them died in two weeks.

Epilogue

I got back to New Orleans a month after the hurricane to find my house had flooded. I went back to Colonial Oaks in November. It was under renovation. My mother moved back in a few months ago. It was hard for me to go in. It's still hard for me to go in. The walls scream at me. I know what I went through in there. It's good that I've had to go back in to be with my mother again. It's all renovated and I had to face my fear. What if it had never reopened, like St. Rita's, where 34 people drowned? I think that it would be hard to look at it.

No one from that nursing home, not the CEO, not any of the owners of the company or anyone has ever said anything to me. When they see me, they say hello and look the other way.

My mother told me since the hurricane that she'll never go on another vacation with me because I had her such a nervous wreck. She doesn't want to evacuate with me next year; she's going to go with her club, the other residents.

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