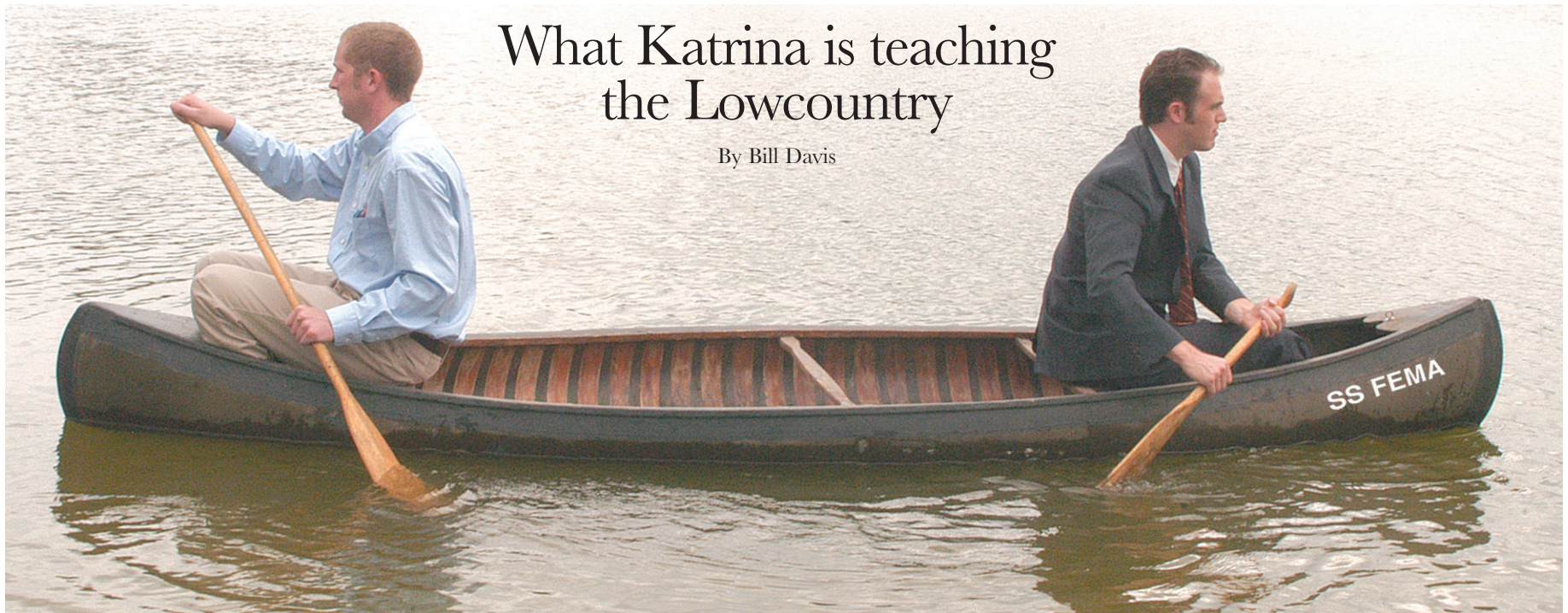


How Prepared Are We?

What Katrina is teaching the Lowcountry

By Bill Davis



NANCY SANTOS

Walt Kelly, the creator of the celebrated cartoon strip *Pogo*, coined the famous saying, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

Well, we have met the Hurricane Katrina evacuees, too, and they are us.

But the evacuees centered at an armory off Mixson Boulevard in North Charleston — roughly 175 “family groups” and rising, according to the local chapter of the American Red Cross — aren’t the enemy. Instead, they’re a reminder to those living in the Lowcountry that it’s not a matter of if, but when, another huge hurricane will hit Charleston. And hurricane season doesn’t end until November.

Locals visiting the armory/shelter could see an elderly couple checking in, investigating how to get much-needed medicine for the white-haired husband. They will see families sitting around folding church tables, staring off, their minds anything but vacant.

They might see a red-faced grandmother, huffing and puffing as she walks the cement

floor with the help of her cane, who comes up and announces that she lives in New Orleans to people already engrossed in unrelated conversations.

They’ll see little children, too young to be in school, waddling around in diapers with eyes as wide as their parents’, in a daze as they try to take in all these new faces, sounds, and information.

They’ll see some New Orleanians who decided they’d wait out the storm in their own houses — some because they had no place else to go, some because they were too poor to have a car to drive out of town, some too stubborn to leave, figuring, as many in the Lowcountry did during Hurricane Hugo, that their house was sure to survive.

They could see a flurry of activity as strangers from the local Holiday Inn unpack a brand-new TV/VCR/DVD to help distract those who haven’t been placed in a local hotel, and volunteers wearing Red Cross smocks adorned with the wrong names trying desperately to make order out of chaos.

“I just called up local hotels and told them I needed 50 rooms for 14 nights within an hour, and it was unbelievable, they all said no problem,” marvels Red Cross volunteer Joanne Ford.

But visitors to the shelter will catch only a glimpse of the total package of despair, fear, and courage residents of that “other” lowcountry have exhibited over the past few weeks.

And then they might also see one of our own, people like Kim Bourge, a 1982 graduate of the Porter-Gaud School, who’d been living on disability since 1991, when a two-car head-on collision interrupted her career as a management consultant.

Meet Kim Bourge

Living with her five dogs and pain medication near the 17th Street Canal in the now-ironically named Lakeview section of New Orleans, within shouting distance of both levees, Bourge, like many of her neighbors, guessed right. Her home survived the high winds of Katrina, but it became unlivable after the levees broke.

“Water started coming in, and I had no idea where it was coming from, but it was up half an inch on the floor, so I went upstairs and got some towels,” says Bourge, who went on from Porter-Gaud to earn a degree in economics from Tulane and worked toward an MBA at the prestigious Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Within an hour, the water inside her house was up to her chest.

“It wasn’t long before I realized there was more water than towels,” she says, laughing at what she first stuffed into plastic contractor garbage bags to keep dry in the attic — gold shoes and winter coats.

Through the walls of her house she heard what she thought was the sound of sirens coming to rescue her and her stranded neighbors. She was wrong, almost dead-wrong. When she finally climbed onto her roof from a second-floor window, Bourge discovered it wasn’t sirens at all, but the muffled alarms of cars slowly sinking beneath the breached levees’ run-off.

At one point, Bourge had been sent to ride out the flood at a nearby firehouse. But once she walked down there, she found it was already completely underwater.

Bourge tried flagging down helicopters with T-shirts, but that didn’t work, she believes, because they couldn’t contact rescuers on the ground.

Despite her dire circumstances, Bourge almost didn’t get into a rescue boat when it arrived. “I almost didn’t leave, thinking, ‘This is my house.’”

So, at this point, she had a bag of bathrobes and six cans of peas. “I had a plan for wind; I had no plan for water.”

Rescuers moved her and others to higher ground, which was, in actuality, Bourge says, just a higher piece of ground. No building. No shelter. Just a roadway, with some dirt and grass.

Bartering belongings and medication for water over the next two days, Bourge says she was saved by her five dogs; not only did they give her the will to live, but passersby in boats would stop to see if her menagerie had food and water. And the increasingly hungry and delusional Bourge would tell them that she didn’t have either, herself.

After a couple more days of intermittent sleep and nutrition came a boat trip that lead to a bus trip that lead to Baton Rouge, La. Bourge eventually found her way back to Charleston, thanks to a ticket her sister bought her.

She doesn’t know what she’s going to do now that she is technically “homeless” — a word that probably doesn’t appear on too many Porter-Gaud grads’ resumes. Bourge plans to go back and see if her home is still standing, or if there will be an insurance adjuster waiting on her with a check and a bulldozer.

But until then, she yearns for something to make her feel human again. Something to help restore a little pride, something to help a feeling of normalcy return. Something as simple, she says, as a little mascara or shampoo not in a tiny travel bottle.

For now, she laughs and tries to put on a brave face. But it’s clear she’s

CONT. P.20

scared, and more than a little angry.
She's not alone, not in Charleston.

The Second Storm

A big part of Mayor Joe Riley's job is to give speeches, and after nearly 30 years in office, he's pretty good at it.

Sometimes, Riley speaks from prepared statements, but he still has the ability to make it sound like it's coming from the heart. Other times, he speaks without notes, but still retains the maddening ability to sound like he's reading from a prepared statement ("Charleston is a wunnerful city ..."), and it's near impossible to knock him off message.

It's also Riley's job, as mayor, to give bland "welcome to our wunnerful city" speeches to visiting groups convening here.

But when he took the podium last Wednesday in the Magnolia Ballroom in the Charleston Place Hotel to welcome the Southeast Tourism Society, Joe was anything but bland.

"I have something very important I want to talk about to you," he began as roughly 200 travel agents listened. "And that's the ineptitude of the national response to this disaster in the Gulf Coast."

Boom. Agents, sensing the sea change, put down their Blackberries and perked up.

"Today, I sent a letter to the U.S. Senators and Congressmen of the affected states, as well as to Sen. (Hilary) Clinton, that I intend to testify at hearings about the slow response," he said.

And when Riley said the word "testify," he didn't sound like a slight, white male who sports a rep tie when he's not in recreational runner togs. No, when he said "testify," he sounded more like a 300-pound black woman who sings religiously in her church choir.

And there ain't no one who can deliver a "come to Jesus" speech like an angry black woman.

"We saw it here with Hugo, we watched it during Andrew as our own police made the first arrests in Homestead, Florida," Riley began to roil about how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has once again dropped the ball.

Riley said that a "hurracun," as the mayor pronounces the word, has the same impact on a city as "an enemy bombing you out.."

"Every minute counts after the enemy hits. But [FEMA] didn't hurry up, and that's why there has got to be a military unit ready," he said, echoing his own words that have already been reported in papers around the country.

"We knew what the situation was going to be in Gulfport, Mississippi, and that's why we dispatched our police officers and first-responders there last week without waiting for 'permission.'"

And what did the city receive for thinking ahead and acting fast? It got a dressing down from a Louisiana emergency official for not waiting, he told a now-rapt audience.

"We've all got to work together to make sure we never see a tragedy like this one," he said, clearly referring to FEMA's response, "never happens again."

Riley then told his oft-repeated and prophetic story of how "helpful" FEMA was during Hurracun Hugo, 16 years ago to the month.

"When the eye of Hugo was hovering over City Hall at our command center, I asked a FEMA rep who was there for his advice, not knowing what I would find in my city after the hurracun passed. And he said the most important thing to do was to make sure I documented all of our expenses."

Boom, boom.

"When I called Fort Campbell, Kentucky, during Hugo for generators, I got chewed out by FEMA, and this was when there wasn't a working power line for 80 miles and the roof was off City Hall."

Even though Riley, e'er the rhetorician, continued to use words like "defeat," "front-line," and "engagement" during his call for a separate federal military force to be formed to attack national disasters, he also rallied the troops, telling the assembled travel agents, already sitting at attention, the same thing he told he the mayor of Gulfport.

"You are going to see an economic boom like you've never seen before."

Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom

When Dr. Rich Harrill, the director of the Institute for Tourism Research at the University of South Carolina's College of Hospitality, Retail, and Sport Management, says he doesn't know the impact another near-direct hit like Hugo or Katrina would have on the Lowcountry's tourism industry, you can take that two ways.

He could mean there's no way to accu-

At one point, Kim Bourge (*right*) had been sent to ride out the flood at a nearby firehouse. But once she walked down there, she found it was already completely underwater.

rately estimate the damage because so many variables are involved: category of the hurricane, if it's high tide, where it hits, and so on. This was Harrill's point.

Or, taken the other way: it would be damn near incalculable in human terms. That was Chef Bob Waggoner's point, as he stood in his dress whites behind a plate of diver scallops between takes on a new mid-morning local television show.

Thirty-five hundred restaurants in New Orleans closed and 55,000 food and beverage workers are out of work, said Waggoner. Thousands of guys just like him, guys who have dedicated their careers to creating a cuisine scene in the Big Easy that easily trumps Charleston's late-comer status. (Check that, "*used to trump*.")

What Harrill *can* say about the economic impact to South Carolina in the immediate wake of a major hurricane hitting our state is this: "a number of tourists are going to be deterred from coming here."

Thanks.

"But the silver lining is that what happened in Charleston, economically, after Hugo is the same thing that's going to be happening in New Orleans. A lot of substandard structures are going to be destroyed and washed away.

"As a result, there will be a boom there ... especially for resort developers, because these people will have what amounts to a clean slate on which to rebuild."

Does that mean for every 20 homeless people in New Orleans there will be one very happy developer?

"No, that's too cryptic," says Harrill. "What that means is that developers will have the opportunity to rebuild the city in whatever image it wants to have.

"Obviously, the first order of business is to protect the historic structures, what's left of them, and have them rebuilt."

Harrill says that historic structures in New Orleans, much as their presence does in Charleston, create a "very strong sense of place" that helps account for some of the Big Easy's "feel."



NANCY SANTOS

He also thinks Charleston's tourism industry may benefit indirectly from a portion of "heritage and cultural" tourists diverted here by the flood there.

Protecting What's Here

Despite having three of her flanks exposed to water — the Ashley, the Cooper, and the Atlantic — Charleston is far safer than New Orleans, according to George Voulgaris, a USC geology prof who studies tide and wave patterns along the South Carolina coast, including 24-hour data from technology launched off the coast near Folly Beach.

Because Charleston is not bowl shaped, like "Nola," there's no place for the water to stick around. A few hours after a major storm surge, like the record-setting one that blew in with Katrina, and Charleston's streets would be relatively dry, with water left standing only in places that flood every time it rains hard anyway.

Additionally, Charleston has an advantage, he says, because ocean waters off the Mississippi delta are shallower than they are off of South Carolina, meaning there is more space for a storm surge to go before heading inland.

That being said, a Katrina-sized hurricane would likely destroy the first row of beach houses in the area immediately, and then wipe out the second row after the buffer of the first row is destroyed and ongoing erosion immediately following the hurricane pulls the carpet from beneath those homes.

According to Voulgaris, redevelopment along South Carolina's coast may need to be rethought after another Hugo-like assault, because it's the structures — houses, stores, hotels — that interrupt the natural flow of sand back to the beach after a hurricane.

"Coastal cities trying to clean up after a hurricane tend to take the sand that's blocking their roadways — sand that would otherwise naturally return — and dump it inland at dumpsites," says Voulgaris with an ironic

chuckle. "We laugh, but it actually happens to sand that should be trucked back out to the beach."

But when 100 mph winds roar and seas come inland with 18-foot storm surges, it's not only the beaches that get inundated. And that's not good news on Charleston's peninsula, where a steady rain can turn the Crosstown into a replica of the 17th Street Canal.

It's Laura Cabiness' job to help keep the streets free of water as the director of the City's Department of Public Service. Cabiness warns that, despite the \$26 million the City has spent on capital storm water drainage projects over the last 14 years alone — and that number doesn't include what taxpayers have chipped in for maintenance of the sewer and drainage systems and pump houses — it's not designed to handle run-off from a hurricane.

Especially since this system struggles mightily to drain streets when only three to five inches of the wet stuff falls over a short period of time.

When a hurricane hits, it's Cathy Haynes' job, as the deputy director of the Charleston County

Emergency Preparedness Division, to help keep Charleston County as safe as she can.

Haynes says the County has a "pretty good" plan in place that addresses the various responsibilities and functions of disaster relief.

Hospitals have evacuation plans ("Inland or further up and inside their own buildings"), jails know where to go, and in case of a Category 2 hurricane, the state is prepared to reverse traffic on I-26 and make it one-way all the way from Charleston to Columbia.

"What we are learning from Katrina is hard to say," says Hayne. "Katrina is not going to be over for a long time."

Haynes says the biggest concern hanging over the Lowcountry is the mind-set that "I don't have to evacuate, my house made it through Hugo and Floyd."

With this year's hurricane season poised to be a banner one, with more named storms and hurricanes expected than in years past, Haynes doesn't know what Charleston's chances are for escaping 2005 relatively unscathed.

"All I can say is it only takes one," she says, as Ophelia lurks in the Atlantic. "Our motto is that an individual needs to be prepared."

Apparently, FEMA has continued to be under-prepared for the evacuation of New Orleans, because as Haynes was making her comments for this article, she was coming down from a stress high. FEMA had earlier that day alerted the state that the Charleston

Air Force base was set to receive more than 100 medical evacuees from the Gulf Coast within the hour.

Within 30 minutes, Haynes oversaw the construction of a crisis center in a hangar there, replete with beds and medical triage facilities.

Problem was, while FEMA's flight was indeed going to Charleston, it was actually sent to the Charleston in *West Virginia*.

As one City Hall wag quipped, "At least FEMA was 50 percent right this time."

Bush League Response

Out in the hall, after delivering a speech that earned him huge applause and had the host announcing, "Now *that's* a mayor," as he left, Riley still hadn't cooled down.

"First of all, FEMA, with President Clinton, was practically a cabinet-level agency. It was led by the emergency management director who had held the job in Arkansas when Clinton was the governor. He was a professional; he got it."

Riley's anger for Michael D. Brown — the former horse breeder association leader President Bush nicknamed "Brownie" who may have padded his resumé and who was taken off the Katrina job and recalled to Washington, D.C. before resigning his post last week — was unmistakable.

Taking up the call for a military unit to be in charge of hurricane disasters from June 1 until the end of November, Riley says a general needs to be in charge.

"A name-taking general who gets things done, who takes down names and kicks butt. He doesn't have to be a cigar-chomper, but it wouldn't hurt," said Riley.

In Riley's plan, that general, the moment a hurricane is about to hit, could "push button X and get Y number of troops alerted and Z number of tankers on their way."

"I'm going to testify because I've got the perspective having been through it. I watched [FEMA's inaction] during Andrew and Katrina. It was *our* traffic officers that re-installed traffic signals in Raleigh, North Carolina, and on the Virgin Islands after hurricanes went through there," he says.

The "injury" and "mental anguish" that occur within a community if there is no immediate response "causes exponential damage as time drags on, as more people become sick and die who don't have to."

As such, Riley doesn't believe he can count on FEMA, as it's currently structured, to be of the most use to Charleston

during another disaster. And it's little wonder, especially since the federal agency apparently has difficulty distinguishing between the Palmetto State and a "Wild and Wonderful" one.

Riley pronounced his city's current level of preparedness to be "great," and said that his New Orleans counterpart, Mayor Ray Nagin, should be forgiven for his harsh — and at times frantic — rhetoric because of the job FEMA didn't do there.

And with Hurricane Ophelia threatening off the South Carolina coast last week, Mayor Riley had an opportunity to live up to his tough talk. On Friday afternoon, the mayor met with the press and senior department heads in his administration to begin mapping out a strategy to get the word out if Ophelia, erratically spinning out in the ocean, decided to crash into the South Carolina coast instead of getting herself to a nunnery.

"Because where it's hovering and the speed it's capable of moving, we won't have the luxury come Tuesday night of being able to track it for several days across the ocean like they did with Katrina," said Riley before the storm's path headed northward.

Saying the need for transportation was one of the biggest lessons learned from the Katrina evacuation, Riley unveiled a plan for local school buses and CARTA vehicles to drive through certain areas and pick up those who don't have the wherewithal to evacuate on their own.

It's ironic that, after less than a week back in her hometown, New Orleanian evacuee Kim Bourge could have been evacuated out of Charleston due to a hurricane. But chances are, that trip would have been a much smoother one. **CP**



NANCY SANTOS

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