

What to Pack for a Hurricane

by Amy E. Schwarzenbach

It piques my nerves that the fall recruiting season coincides with the peak of hurricane season. When I was a law firm recruiter, Hurricane Isidore and Tropical Storm Lilly wreaked havoc on the recruiting season. During my first fall semester in Career Services at Loyola University New Orleans School of Law, Hurricane Ivan made us scramble the week before on-campus interviews (OCI). This year, after many hours of planning, Hurricane Katrina cancelled my program — or so I thought! Who knew I would become a displaced recruiting coordinator for an entire semester?

Katrina made landfall on Monday, August 29, 2005. On the preceding Friday, Career Services had a full day of programming including Mock Interview Day, a Federal Judicial Interviewing Program at the US District Court, and a Bar-sponsored minority job fair student seminar. Dear husband called me that afternoon to tell me we might need to evacuate. I curtly replied I was too busy to think about it. After all, we all know student events are more important than hurricanes! We wrapped up our day at 8:00 pm, and I fortuitously left the office with my most valuable possessions: my OCI program calendar, a student directory, and class rank information. In the morning my husband woke me up, told me to pack, and proceeded to cut the grass. It is a common New Orleans phenomenon — the men clean up their yards before impending disaster. With the yard pristine and clothes for a weekend getaway, we headed to Houston with our ornery dog and two energetic sons.

Every year as hurricane season approaches, emergency management officials remind New Orleanians to check their hurricane supplies: water, batteries, canned goods. New Orleanians can recite the list like Pvt. Benjamin Buford “Bubba” Blue recites shrimp dishes to Forrest Gump. Unfortunately, our recitation did not translate

into applied reality because the list is only good if you stay. We left. The only hurricane supplies loaded into our car were our swimsuits, flip flops, and the precious OCI materials. Without being able to foresee the events that would ultimately unfold, we left all our personal possessions behind. Having evacuated so many times before only to return to an intact city, we did not believe that what we always knew could happen would happen. It took Gina Rowsam of Oklahoma City University School of Law — not CNN — to convince us we would not be back on campus in a week.

Let us go back in time for a moment to Ivan. A lesson learned from Ivan was the importance of our Web-based scheduling system. Without it, we could not have managed the 2004 on-campus interview program without rescheduling employer interview dates. With it, I scheduled interviews from the lobby of the La Quinta Galleria in Houston. Now that’s empowerment! The 2004 program moved forward with hardly a ripple.

Katrina did the one thing I had not prepared for — she struck too early. As we all know, timing makes all the difference. Katrina showed me even the best contingency plans are no match for nature. Ivan struck the Gulf Coast in mid-September. The law firms had already received résumés and many had returned selection lists before Ivan shut our school down for a week. Last August, the OCI process had hardly begun. Our students had just returned to school one week before the evacuation was mandated.

Katrina struck, the levees broke, and it became evident we had a problem on our hands. I had no means of communicating with employers or students. New Orleans area phone numbers were useless — even cell phones. Firms quickly relocated to other cities, but obtaining their new contact information was like seeking the Holy Grail.

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From August 29 until October 7, my remote office consisted of an out-of-state cell phone number and limited access to my brother's relic of a computer. Few students had completed their bidding and even those who had uploaded their résumés no longer had the same contact information. What good were New Orleans phone numbers and addresses? We were scattered to the winds!

Pam Occhipinti, Molly Vigour, and I made our respective odysseys across the US throughout September. During our evacuation, we managed to coordinate contingency internships for our law students, who were displaced across the country at over 65 law schools, by borrowing computers, going to Internet cafes, and visiting public libraries. Tracy Evans and her staff at LSU immediately came to our rescue by folding our students who relocated to Baton Rouge into their program. Loyola rebounded quickly and reopened its doors in Houston on October 3. Throughout September we searched for our students. Through AALS, every law school provided us information about visiting student enrollment. By October 4, we had contact information for every law student. It was just the ticket we were looking for. Armed with that list, we were back on track.

I returned to New Orleans and found the city essentially deserted. Uncertainty hung over New Orleans like a specter, but amid the desolation there was an air of excitement and hope. Many of us who returned early depended on the National Guard for water and MREs. The next hurdle I faced was determining how and where I could work. Our law school building was closed. My home had caught on fire during Hurricane Rita. My husband is general counsel for an engineering firm and was transferred to another city. My babysitters were gone. Suddenly I was juggling a full-time job, full-time parenting, and the role of contractor. I worried I could not live up to my own advice to students about multi-tasking. In early October, I set up a home office with touch-and-go utilities and restarted the OCI program.

My days in October and November were spent counseling students by phone and e-mail as well as reestablishing connections with employers. Listening to everyone's stories was amazing and humbling. As our office spoke with employers, no one knew what the future held. Many employers' and students' homes were flooded or obliterated. The students were anxious about their prospects and at the time we lacked answers that could totally reassure them. Contacting employers proved to be a continuing challenge, but as time passed and services were restored, we reconnected with them. While some employers forged ahead with their recruiting programs, others wanted to consider their business situation before moving forward with recruiting.

Rhonda Beassie and her staff in the Office of Career Development at the University of Houston Law Center graciously welcomed Pam and Molly into their office. From there they were able to visit with students in other states and attend job fairs and conferences. Next I faced structuring an unprecedented interview program in which all law students could participate, regardless of where they were in school. Students had to resubmit résumés with new contact information and interviews were scheduled across the United States.

As I write this article in late January, it is now week 22 of Fall OCIs with Spring OCIs looming before me. Some students are submitting version XXIV of their résumé because they have yet another new address. My computer is smoking. I am running on the excitement that comes with the good coming out of this nadir in our city's history. Over 90% of employers have requested interview dates. As time distances us from Katrina, we see that New Orleans and the legal industry here will survive. Our future OCI programs will change because of Katrina and its aftermath. We had stayed with a traditional schedule for two reasons: (1) to accommodate our local market and (2) to give us several extra weeks to work with students. There are several practical lessons learned from Katrina. First, it is imperative that employers have student résumés and interview schedules before hurricane season peaks. The program must begin earlier with

summer deadlines. Second, collecting student and employer emergency contact information in advance will reduce the logistical nightmare we faced last fall. Finally, there will be more spring programming about OCIs to prepare students before the summer.

Katrina demonstrated to us that our NALP community is full of gracious individuals who helped our students, assisted us, and gave us the moral support we needed. We are grateful to everyone who reached out to us.

Everyone asks Pam, Molly, and me if we will remain in New Orleans. Yes. Louisiana is our

home and come as it may, this experience will only make us more prepared to face future unknowns.

What will I pack next hurricane season? My OCI program calendar, student directory, class rank information, and emergency contact information, and, of course, my swimsuit and flip flops.

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