

Evacuation Plans

“Don’t do it!” some of my friends said.

Clearly, my friends were just looking out for me as I considered an offer last year to leave my comfortable life in southern Illinois after 20 years and move to New Orleans, the epicenter of Hurricane Katrina destruction two years before. Perhaps these friends were concerned that my personal coping skills with disasters were rusty after such a long time in Carbondale, a bucolic town on the edge of the Shawnee National Forest. My response was generally one of “P’shaw!” After all, I had coped with living in the middle of tornado alley and had endured sub-zero temperatures, debilitating snowstorms, and even an earthquake or two.

Besides (I told myself), how likely would another hurricane hit New Orleans? So, I accepted Tulane University’s offer, packed up my belongings, and in late June moved to the Big Easy. (By the way...moving to a humid climate in the middle of the summer? Not such a great idea.)

At any rate, I quickly settled in and learned how to pronounce some of the French street names in local NOLA parlance, figured out where the best sources for “making groceries” were, and generally took my helpful staff’s advice on everything from insurance (“sign up for flood insurance as soon as you can”) to streetcars (“make sure you have exact change”).

A month ago I sat through Tulane Law School’s orientation for first-year students and learned about having a personal plan should a hurricane enter the Gulf of Mexico. I picked up a map showing how “contraflow” worked, should a mandatory evacuation be called by city officials (wherein all interstate highways out of southeastern Louisiana would be changed to one direction, allowing for maximum evacuation routes). I looked at the university’s suggestions for securing computers and other equipment should a category two storm or higher threaten. Through all this I kept minimizing the possibility of a hurricane, though. After all, it had been three years since Katrina. Scarcely a week later, Gustav entered my life.

The Storm Threatens

At first, the storm just seemed to be a tiny speck in the Atlantic, but forecasters quickly cautioned residents that this could be a major event. As days went by,

Gustav grew with intensity, and city and university officials started to keep a wary eye on the possibility that the storm might affect New Orleans. We started meeting in the law school to discuss possible evacuations and put into place plans for keeping communication channels open should the storm disrupt electricity and telephone lines (I signed up for Skype, a software service that allows telephone calls over the Internet, and obtained a Web camera for my laptop). We established an emergency Web site for the law school, and we all contributed content. Finally, we kept our fingers crossed that Gustav would go somewhere else (personally, I was hoping it would simply evaporate into the clouds, but clearly my knowledge of meteorology and simple science is lacking).



by James E. Duggan

On the Friday before Labor Day weekend, Tulane decided to close and urged students, faculty, and staff to follow their personal hurricane plans. I am grateful to several law librarians around the country (and even AALL staff) who offered to give me shelter.

My staff and I made certain that all computers and other electrical devices were unplugged, moved items away from windows, and generally ensured that we had computer tapes and backups moved off-site. At home, I moved inside items that could become missiles during high winds (outdoor furniture, plants, and my concrete gargoyle statue). I decided to give myself until Saturday morning to decide whether I would leave town and hunkered down to watch the continuous coverage on local television.

Decision Time

Early Saturday morning saw thousands of people already leaving the city and rumors of a mandatory evacuation began to be mentioned. Figuring that I did not want to be stuck in the bumper-to-bumper traffic that contraflow would bring, I decided to evacuate back to Carbondale. I packed important papers, clothes, and my all-important *AALL Directory and Handbook* and left at 4 a.m., although I immediately got stuck in lines of traffic leaving the city to the west. Fortunately, much of the traffic was headed towards Baton Rouge for the rescheduled 10 a.m. Louisiana State University (LSU) football game, and I was able to make the normally 10-hour drive to Carbondale in only 11.5 hours.

I stayed with friends in Carbondale and spent the next few days anxiously following the storm’s path. A mandatory evacuation was called on Sunday, with New Orleans’ mayor calling Gustav “the mother of all storms.” Fortunately for New Orleans, Gustav made landfall west of the city on Labor Day and quickly continued on a northwesterly track through the state, affecting Baton Rouge and other areas with high winds, flooding, and downed electricity lines. Power was out in large portions of New Orleans, however, and lots of tree limbs and debris littered the streets. Most of the city levees that were breached during Katrina held this time around, although there was “overtopping” in several areas.

Initially Tulane had planned to reopen on Wednesday, but because of the mandatory evacuation, university officials decided to reopen on Saturday, September 6. I kept in touch with the dean and other law school officials by conference call and learned that there had been only minimal damage to the campus. I also e-mailed my staff (all of whom had evacuated from the city) and apprised them of reopening plans. I phoned several key staff and ensured that we had staff to cover opening the law library on time.

Back Home

I returned to New Orleans nearly a week later, on Friday, September 5 (this time taking 13 hours to make the return trip, due to heavy congestion outside the city). I was pleasantly surprised to find that the power was on at my apartment, and there was minimal damage outside (although apparently the neighborhood had decided to stack every fallen tree limb on the block in front of my walkway!).

On Saturday we reopened the law library, and fortunately the damage was at least manageable (five broken windows, our flat roof leaked again in a couple of places, and several boxes of court papers we had been storing were water-logged and had to be sent out for treatment). The same could not be said for our neighbors to the north (law libraries at LSU and Southern University were without power for days, and there was widespread wind damage in Baton Rouge and other areas).

As I write this, Hurricane Ike has just devastated Galveston and the Houston areas. I am grateful that New Orleans was again spared, although I know that law libraries in Houston and areas as far north as Chicago were affected by flooding and power outages.

(continued on page 37)

from the president — continued from page 6

It is comforting to know that law librarians across the country have offered to help out and stand ready to assist, should the need arise.

Personally, in spite of my friends'

advice, I am satisfied to know that I have successfully coped with an evacuation of a city that saw nearly two million people leave during the course of a few days. After three months in the city, I can

finally call myself a New Orleanian. ■

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