

PART I

Coping with Crises

These are the times that try men's souls.

—Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*

CHAPTER 1

The Fifty-Eight Days: An Overview

On the morning of Monday, August 29, 2005, the collective sigh of relief from Lafayette, Louisiana, was almost audible. Having made landfall between Grand Isle and the Mississippi River around 6:30 A.M., Hurricane Katrina was turning east, away from Vermilion Bay. With sympathy for those it was bound to hit and hurt, Lafayette gave thanks that it had dodged this one. Before the day was over, however, another kind of crisis had arrived. Greg Davis, executive director of the Cajundome, had been notified that his facility was a potential evacuation shelter. He could not know then what he and his staff, the American Red Cross, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and local volunteers would be called upon to do and provide. He would have been staggered to learn that from August 28 to October 25, 2005, the Cajundome would house and feed evacuees from Hurricane Katrina, a category 4 storm that displaced more than one million people, and less than four weeks later it would be called to extend care to those fleeing Hurricane Rita—more than 18,000 people in all.

The events of Monday night only deepened the problems that Davis and his staff would have to confront. The levees in New Orleans failed, leaving the

city in the grips of flooding, looting, and potential disease. With that scenario the Cajundome inevitably became a mega-shelter. Official notification arrived at ten on the morning of Tuesday, August 30, but the staff had little doubt that the space would be commandeered. Evacuees were scheduled to arrive after lunch, but in fact, they began coming within half an hour. With no preparation time, the staff had to move swiftly into new roles. They hastily set up registration procedures while operations director Phil Ashurst marked out floor space for people to occupy. Making quick reference to the checklist of building readiness needs that he had compiled from previous storm experiences, he began to call his events workers to set up and maintain the shelter. He checked emergency systems, paging systems, generators, and fuel. He locked down restricted areas. He wondered where he was going to find the provisions people would need: cots, mattresses, towels, and blankets. The pressure mounting, Sam Voisin, director of sales, would comment to Cajundome colleagues: "The events business is good preparation for running a shelter because both of them deal with fluid situations. They change minute by minute. To work in event management means being 'prepared for being unprepared.'" The rest of the staff was less sure. They were not trained for this duty. They just hoped their skill and experience in crowd control would be helpful.

The Acadiana area chapter of the American Red Cross arrived on Tuesday, along with John Francis Sheehan, Jr., community relations supervisor for FEMA. Local medical personnel and other volunteers began to show up, everyone trying to determine how to proceed. First things first, the doctors and nurses

immediately started treating the arriving evacuees. Food appeared in just over an hour, and “Bubba crews,” local groups of men who cooked, were engaged to provide the evening’s meal.

By Wednesday a routine began to take hold. City-parish president Joey Durel assembled a task force of business people to consider what Lafayette’s response to Katrina should be. Hurriedly they created committees to deal with every aspect of the storm’s impact. The medical community set up a clinic in the Cajundome, and DeMarcus Thomas, a coach and educator, arrived to create recreational programs for children and adults. As it was the end of the month and Social Security checks were expected, Karen Jennings from the Social Security Administration met with Tony Credeur, director of the local American Red Cross chapter, to arrange for their distribution. Life seemed to be settling into a strange but predictable normalcy for the roughly 3,500 evacuees in the Cajundome.

The fledgling organization hastily put together in two days was not ready to deal with the new crisis that occurred early on Thursday, September 1. At one in the morning, more than fifty buses with around 2,700 evacuees pulled into the front drive of the Cajundome. All staff members, many of them on summer vacation, were hastily called back to process the new arrivals, swelling the operating staff from twenty-five or so to around 150 people. Almost 6,500 evacuees now occupied the building, and more remained in the parking lots.

Two days later another challenge presented itself, this time at 2:00 A.M., when an additional seventeen busloads of New Orleans evacuees arrived. They were

exhausted, dirty, ill, and hungry, having been on buses since August 31 looking for a place that would take them in. Like other shelters, the Cajundome was full, but it gave them food, showers, and medical attention, even though they had to sit in the heat outside the building. By five that afternoon, buses from the Lafayette Parish Schools and the City of Lafayette had moved them to other shelters. They could not be registered to stay at the Cajundome, but they were welcomed and served there.

The quality of life at the mega-shelter improved considerably over the next couple of days. The Public Works Department of Lafayette Consolidated Government worked diligently to build twenty-four showers, two of them for handicapped use, by Monday, September 5. Around the same time director Greg Davis objected to the food being served by the Red Cross, claiming that it was neither nutritious nor tasty. Having made his point, he had the Cajundome take over all food service at that facility and the adjacent Convention Center. Hiring a chef and a nutritionist to attend to special dietary needs, the facility's food and beverage service, Artisan Catering, began to produce meals that looked and tasted better: scrambled eggs with grits, bacon, and biscuits for breakfast; shrimp Creole with rice and barbecued brisket with roasted potatoes for lunch and dinner. Morale began to rise. Local entertainment groups spontaneously appeared. The Conservatory of the Acadiana Symphony Orchestra presented "Music Time," a musical experience for the children, and bands came to give concerts, and choirs came to sing. The evacuees were even invited to attend a football game at nearby Cajun Field.

All might have gone smoothly from this point on except for Rita, another giant hurricane that, like Katrina, took aim at the Louisiana Gulf Coast. Because the Cajundome was not built to withstand hurricane-force winds, the Red Cross had agreed with Cajundome officials and the City of Lafayette years ago to use it only as a poststorm shelter, not as an evacuation center during a storm. Since the lantern area at the top of the building and the glass panels on its sides that could be dangerous in high winds were only part of the problem, on Thursday, September 22, the Katrina evacuees were evacuated again, moved this time from the Cajundome to the CenturyTel Center in Bossier City. By the time they began to return on the following Wednesday, the Convention Center had been opened as an additional shelter to care for Rita's victims, mostly residents of Vermilion, Cameron, and Calcasieu parishes. Nobody knew what to expect from the mix of urban, mostly African-Americans from New Orleans and the mostly rural whites from southwestern Louisiana. They were a diverse jumble of urban and rural, young and old, black and white. What they held in common was loss, need, and an unknown future.

By the beginning of October the number of residents at the Cajundome had begun to fall. The diaspora was in full force, with people who until then had never left their New Orleans neighborhoods getting on trains to places they could not locate on a map. By the middle of the month New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin had visited the Cajundome to make extraordinary promises of what FEMA would do and provide for those who returned to his city, and Calcasieu Parish had announced that everyone could return.

The numbers continued to drop. Security was reduced. Cleaning began at the Cajundome. On October 25, when fewer than 250 evacuees remained at the shelter, they were moved to the Comeaux Recreation Center. The crises were over.

For fifty-eight days the Cajundome had assumed a new identity. It had served as a hurricane mega-shelter in sharp contrast to its usual role as an events and entertainment facility owned by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and Lafayette Consolidated Government. Opened in 1984 with an adjustable capacity of 4,500 to 13,500, the Cajundome usually presents an average of 140 events and ten to fifteen concerts a year. The facility had been designated as a shelter twice before Hurricane Katrina to provide short-term housing for people who were moving through, but it had never dealt with a catastrophe of this magnitude. Katrina, and then Rita, involved around 125 volunteers, eleven Master's Commission Groups, and ten organizations to help the displaced. Together they provided a total of 20,527 working hours. The shelter became a city in itself, offering the services provided by any community: food, shelter, medical care, mental-health counseling, postal service, laundry services, school, entertainment, security, transportation, even massages. It also became the site of human experiences that ranged from birth to death, through friendship, kindness, anxiety, and hope.

The success of the operation stemmed from the attitudes of all who were involved. The evacuees were treated with compassion and dignity, following the command of Captain Fowler of the Lafayette Police Department. As he instructed his officers: "You will assume everyone is a friend unless proved otherwise."

The evacuees responded in kind. James Proctor, a local volunteer, described the situation by saying, “Everyone was instinctively nice, gracious, and polite to each other. That includes the residents. They would hold doors for each other. There was a palpable feeling that we were all in this together. There was no time for conflict.”