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Books: 58 days of waiting

A few days after evacuees started flowing into Lafayette after the landfall of Hurricane Katrina and the following levee failures that inundated 80 percent of New Orleans, Cajundome executive director Greg Davis called Ann Dobie, a retired UL professor of English, to document what has been happening.

Dobie grabbed her laptop, found a desk in front of the hundreds of people using the arena as an emergency shelter, and started writing down the stories.

Her "reporter's notebook" contained the daily happenings of the staff, volunteers, health care providers and government workers but she also logged heart-breaking stories of the evacuees' plights. The result is a book published this month titled *Fifty-Eight Days in the Cajundome Shelter* by Pelican Publishing of New Orleans.

"(Davis) said, 'I think this should be made on the record,'" Dobie explained, adding that her first job was to document the jobs of the Cajundome staff and operations and to present a chronology for future use.

"Then I became the story lady," she said. "(The evacuees) wanted to tell their story because it made it real. It validated their stories."

There was the story of the couple separated from a child with a brain tumor taken to Houston, the family in St. Bernard Parish who dove under water to swim under a fence in order to get to high land and then walked and hitchhiked to Lafayette and a mother and young girl who carried their dead father with them in order that his body be treated with respect.

Despite rumors of violence and drugs among those evacuated from New Orleans, Dobie said for the most part operations ran smoothly, and the evacuees were agreeable and appreciative.

"So many misconceptions, misleading stories about how dangerous they were," she said. "They weren't dangerous. They were beaten down, victims."

The book was written in part to dispel those myths, she added. "It was important for



Photo by Claudia B. Laws

Lena Turner, left, of Lafayette leads a family of evacuees from New Orleans away from the Cajundome in September 2005. Turner was taking the family to her home to shelter them.

the public to hear their stories too.”

Coming out a leader

The first incarnation of the book was to create a book of best practices, she explained, for the International Association of Auditorium Managers. The publication discussed how arenas play a part in an emergency, how they handle childcare, special needs, etc., in case a disaster happens in any part of the world, Dobie said. Afterwards, Dobie saw a need to publish the account, which included her personal journal, for the general readership.

Even though Dallas, Houston, Baton Rouge and New Orleans all used their arenas as emergency shelters, Lafayette became a model of what worked, Dobie said. She credits Davis for "creating positive attitudes and helping people get along.”

Meals were another issue. The Red Cross, who works worldwide to help people recover after a disaster, brought in their usual canned items and dried foods, which didn't fly with South Louisianans, Dobie said. The Cajundome stepped in and started a buffet of "wonderful meals with minimal cost" that meant all the world to the evacuees.

"Things like that are magnified in importance when you've lost everything," she said. Health care professionals arrived from all over, and volunteers worked long shifts. Local police instructed their staff to treat everyone as a friend unless proven otherwise, Dobie said.

"That was an amazing starting point, from suspicion to 'Let me help you.' ”

Problems did exist with FEMA, the Red Cross and the Cajundome staff being forced to work together on Cajundome property.

"If was an enormous job of coordination," Dobie explained. "If there was a problem, it was management agencies competing for claims.

"But by and large, most people wanted to get along. And I can't stress how hard everybody worked.”

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