

# Rebuilding New Orleans, one nurse at a time

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## KEYWORDS:

New Orleans;  
Katrina;  
Nurse

**Abstract** The purpose of this article is to share insights from nursing faculty as they rallied to graduate Level II sophomores at Delgado Community College Charity School of Nursing in New Orleans post-Katrina. Nursing of the Adult Client II faculty assembled students to return to class 6 weeks after Katrina and complete their curriculum in a compressed semester. The students graduated with only a 1-month delay with a 90% pass rate for the National Council Licensure Examination.

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## 1. Introduction

The story we are about to share with you is true. It is a story of survival, of how a team of fellow nursing educators and students rallied together to achieve one common goal: graduating our Level II sophomores in the associate degree program at Delgado Community College Charity School of Nursing (CSN)... despite the greatest tragedy our city has ever seen.

## 2. Taken by surprise

Those of us who live in the great city of New Orleans and its surrounding areas take hurricanes very seriously. If there's a storm brewing in the Gulf, we create an evacuation plan, booking hotel rooms near and far, hoping that we will

be able to cancel those reservations. We did not see this one coming, as Katrina was heading to Florida. On Friday night, August 26, 2005, many of us were unaware that "she" had changed her course. By Saturday morning, long gas lines and frequent weather updates had made it clear, Katrina was headed our way. Here we go again, another false alarm. Just 1 year earlier, we at Delgado Community College CSN had evacuated, taking our 3-day change of clothes and headed off to Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas, or any of the other cities we New Orleanians often flee. Then, after 3 days, when the coast is clear, we would head home. This time, it was different.

We actually did think on Monday, August 29, 2005, that we had dodged another bullet, but storm surges and levee breeches created the unthinkable. Our beloved New Orleans was flooding. The water rose quickly and sent shock waves across the nation. Most of us had evacuated. Some of our colleagues had stayed.

Veronica Jean "I rode out Hurricane Katrina. I became trapped on the streets of New Orleans and ended up in the infamous Superdome, bringing my laptop with me. The

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completion of a graduate paper and final examinations were the reasons that I stayed. Tunnel vision regarding my education took precedence over evacuation.”

Joan Breeden “I evacuated with my son, my dog and my cat to my nephew’s home in Hammond, Louisiana, 60 miles NW of New Orleans. We lost power and had no TV, just the radio. It was hard to imagine what we were hearing. Horrors in the Superdome—no food and water, increasing violence, dreadful conditions and thousands stranded. I think we were all so overwhelmed that we were in denial about what was happening.”

Ann Nealy “I was in Dallas, Texas on the morning of August 29, 2005 and received a frantic call stating that the water was rising. From that point on, we were glued to the television set trying to glean any information that was available.”

Joan Hodge “As I listened in my motel room for the next several hours, the true magnitude of the catastrophe was revealed and I began to see just how much the lives of New Orleanians had changed. There are no words for that awakening.”

### 3. Nursing diagnosis: Anxiety related to isolation, communication breakdown, and fear of the unknown

The hurricane ravaged the city, with many parts literally under water. Telephone lines were down and communication, as we knew it, was gone.

Jill Lambert “I was here during the storm and when the floodwaters rose. I walked chest deep through filthy water, saw my home, my possessions and memories destroyed. The lack of communication, of not knowing what had happened, what was going to happen was frightening.”

Joan Hodge “In the days that followed, I struggled to come to terms with the loss of my home, my belongings, my neighborhood and possibly my job. Those early days were spent trying to get information about the damage left by the flooding and reconnecting with friends and colleagues. What brought the most comfort was reconnecting with people you had built life-long relationships with; they seemed to make the rest bearable.”

Joan Breeden “Since I didn’t know what was happening with CSN, I contacted West Jefferson Medical Center and they were happy to schedule me for some shifts to give the nurses who had been working a chance for a break. I will never forget driving across Lake Pontchartrain the first time I returned to N.O. after the storm. There were no lights, the city was completely dark. The interstate was empty with only a car here and there. And the smell—I will never forget it. I don’t even know exactly how to describe it—a combination of rotting material, mold and something worse—death?”

Kim Uddo “Since my employer and all other New Orleanians were under water and unable to communicate, I felt like I had to find a nursing job, pronto, in North Louisiana. In my mind, New Orleans was destroyed for good, overrun with water and chaos. I felt if I could secure a job at Louisiana Tech, the closest college to the small town to which I evacuated, I would be able to bring my 10 CSN clinical students to me.”

Ann Nealy “After the shock of what had actually taken place with Katrina, I began to wonder about my colleagues. There was no telephone communication in our (504) area code. My cell phone was making a strange noise; my 8 year old niece informed me that I had a text-message.”

Evelyn Dodson “It was bad enough that my life had been turned upside down by the storm of the century; now those closest to me were spread out all over the United States. It frightened me that my support system was no longer readily available. Staying in touch with friends and family became challenging. Landlines were not in operation and cell phones bombarded the airways. By chance I discovered that text messaging would be the communication salvation! I sent a text message to every mobile number in my cell phone, checking to make sure family, friends and students were safe.”

Wendy Garretson “The first text message I received was from a student asking, ‘How ’r u?’ I was never so happy to hear from a student in all of my life. I quickly replied and asked the whereabouts of any students she was aware of. My own tracking list had begun.”

Kim Uddo “Rico Rodriguez, one of my clinical students, had everybody’s phone number in his cell phone. I mean EVERYBODY, including mine... Thank God. It was those early days of communication and psychological support via our text messaging that helped me focus on common goals of getting regrouped and back in the classroom.”

### 4. Our journey back to charity

By September, there was a message board set up by Delgado to find out everyone’s status. A temporary campsite at Louisiana Community and Technical College System campus, located in Baton Rouge (60 miles west of New Orleans) was in place. We had to operate out of town, but at least we had a home base. Joan Hodge, the coordinator for Nursing of the Adult Client II (NAC II), began the challenging task of assessing how many instructors would be available to come and assist in preparing our students for graduation. Despite the fact that Joan’s home was completely covered with over 8 ft of water, her leadership and dedication never wavered. Putting her immeasurable loss aside, her sole focus was our students.

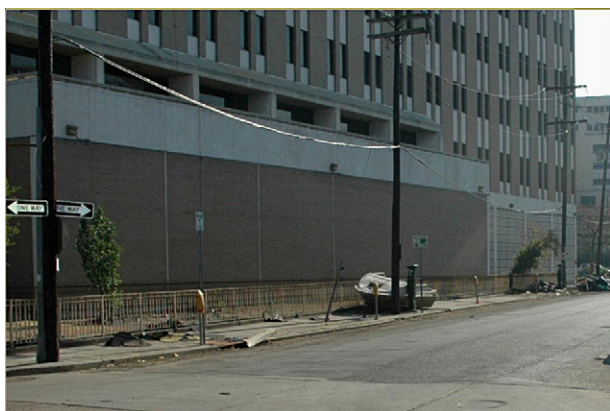


**Fig. 1** The water line on the side of our building.

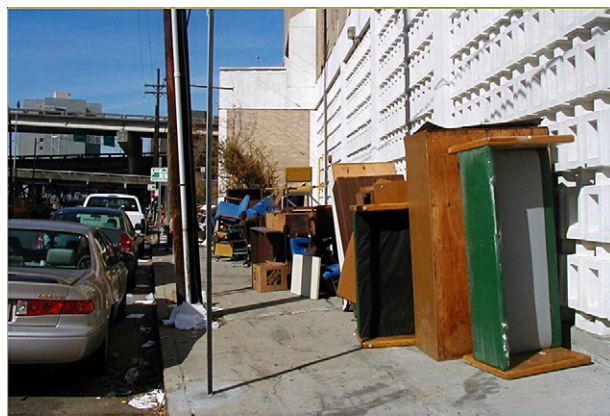
Jill Lambert “Following my rescue, I ended up in Houston where I stayed for 6 weeks, until I received a phonecall from Joan, telling me to come home and that school was going to reopen. Was that possible? Where was I going to live? How was I going to get there? I was able to solve the living arrangement dilemma through the generosity of my nephew and his wife who took me in. I was able to purchase a car. Now I was set, I thought, but so many obstacles were still in front of me.”

Lynn Lowery “The day I received the call from my coordinator was one of mixed feelings. Although I was elated at the prospect of going to work in the place I wanted to, I was also fearful of the thought of the living as well as the working conditions. I knew this was an important step in the rebuilding of the nursing program, the city and my life.”

Veronica Jean “Although I had relocated to Lake Charles, Louisiana, which is quite a distance from New Orleans, I returned to assist. There was a sense of obligation I felt toward the graduating class and my co-workers. Two co-workers graciously offered their home to me to afford me the opportunity to do the clinical experience with the students. I remained in Lake Charles until the end of November 2005.”



**Fig. 2** A boat on the sidewalk outside our building.



**Fig. 3** Water-logged furniture outside our building.

Evelyn Dodson “Finally I located all 10 of my students and my boss as well. Joan had begun working to find out which students and faculty might return. I gathered this information for her in regards to my students. With much planning, class would resume for our 2nd semester sophomores on Monday, October 10th. My students’ need to graduate gave me yet another reason to expedite my return home.”

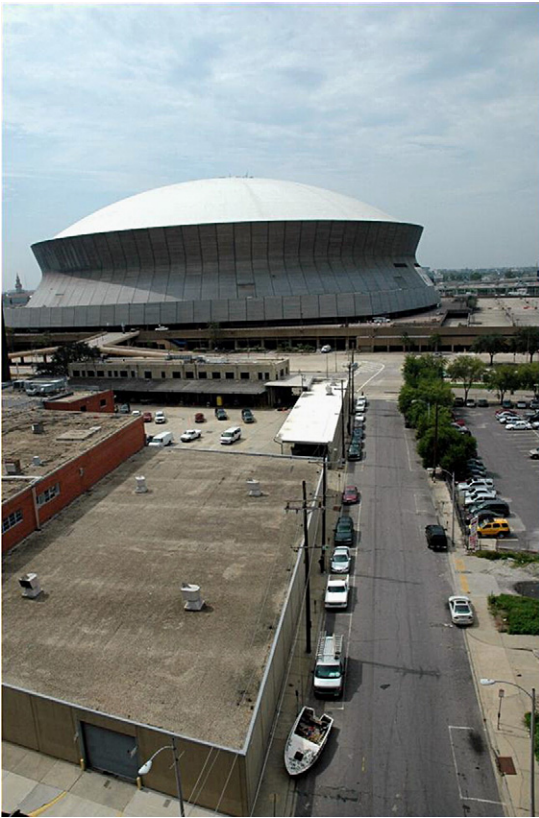
## 5. A sweet homecoming

Our School of Nursing building had flooded in the basement and would not reopen until mid-November. Necessitating creativity in the form of meeting spaces, we met at a faculty member’s home. We met to devise a plan, and we did it New Orleans’ style; everybody brought a dish!

Wendy Garretson “My home was spared by Katrina, as I live 30 miles west of New Orleans. I was humbled to offer my home as a place to gather and to host our planning sessions. Our first all day session focused on creating the list of returning students and all of their contact information. Huddled around my kitchen table, we began to compile our roster. Students were scattered all across the United States and many enrolled in other nursing programs who graciously accepted them. A second all-day planning session welcomed back more returning faculty and enabled us to finalize some plans.”

Kim Uddo “During this second planning meeting, we learned that the downtown school building, just two blocks away from the crippled and abused Superdome, would be open for one day only. The city was still under martial law and curfew was still in effect. Driving to the workplace was strange. A commandeered boat was lodged on our sidewalk by the entrance to our driveway, a refrigerator taped with duct tape and decorated with Katrina—graffiti was across the street, and the Superdome looked trashed and dilapidated from its stint as citywide evacuation shelter [see Figs. 1–4].





**Fig. 4** Our close proximity to the New Orleans Superdome.

Repairs and safety checks had to be performed prior to our reoccupation of the building. Since we knew we would have classes resumed but not in our building, we had to get as many teaching supplies as possible out of the school. Small task forces of SUV-driving faculty, including myself, met at the steaming hot, stale-smelling, and pitch-black building. There was no electricity, and our next door neighbor was pumping out their stench water onto our front driveway. It would become a very hot and smelly job, but after cleaning out my refrigerator of its incubation, this job was comparably tolerable, yet more physical. The faculty huffed up five and six flights of dark stairs with flashlights in hand. We raided the skills laboratory of huge, life-size manikins, long fake arms connected to blood bags for IV start practice, defibrillators, airway management supplies, dysrhythmia programs, and other items essential for our mandatory 'Code Workshop,' an 8-hour clinical day that would be held at some place yet to be determined."

Obviously, everything was not sweet about our homecoming, but the comradery shared at our planning sessions outweighed any negatives.

Joan Breeden "I was just so grateful to see everyone and to have my job. I wasn't concerned about how difficult it would be."

Jill Lambert "Words cannot describe my joy when I met up with my peers. We are such a unique faculty here at Charity; we are a family, not just co-workers. Where would we have class? What hospitals could we use? How would we fulfill our community obligations? After much discussion and suggestions, we were able to answer these questions for the short term."

Joan Hodge "Sharing the experience with others and getting reconnected was the best start to a long road home. Whoever coined the phrase, this is not a sprint, but a marathon, said it best, for it has been a marathon that's required endurance and perseverance."

## 6. A flood of support

Through a flood of support from area hospitals, the NAC II course was set to resume on October 10, 2006. We found a home for our Code Workshop at East Jefferson General Hospital. They lent us not only physical space but also their equipment. We held our lectures in the conference rooms at East Jefferson General Hospital and West Jefferson Medical Center. We were also able to hold some classes on the Westbank campus of Delgado Community College.

So many of our clinical affiliates were closed, including our beloved Charity Hospital, the city's only Level I Trauma Center and one of the main teaching facilities in the city. Numerous hospitals rallied to provide us with clinical options. Our search took us north of Lake Pontchartrain to many neighboring hospitals, all of which opened their doors and their hearts to us.

The generosity from so many sources was overwhelming. Elsevier donated e-books to every student and to each faculty member. Cash donations were used to provide copy cards, and any student in need received US\$25 toward the purchase of a uniform or nursing shoes.

## 7. School is back in session

By now, we had lost six valuable weeks of class time and clinical. We wanted to graduate our ADN sophomores in a timely fashion and there was only one way to achieve this: COMPRESSED!!! Yes, we would make up for lost time and we would essentially teach the entire semester in only 12 weeks.

Lynn Lowery "I returned home on the Sunday prior to starting classes. All of my lectures were in my office, but the revisions were on a disc. The lecture information and other related material were picked up for me, so I did not review it. I was told that I would be teaching back to back lectures. I took a deep breath because I did not know what

to expect. The day I walked into the auditorium I was amazed at a room full of students with the same theme... rebuilding of lives. As I prepared to lecture in the auditorium of the hospital, it was my old power point lecture, but the students had the correct notes. I ad libbed as the slides came up on the screen, then the lecturer's nightmare happened. The power point projector stopped working after the first lecture. I explained to the students to just follow the notes and we would make it work. I knew after all the adversities each person went through, this was minute."

Ann Nealy "The mini semester was grueling; we had so much information to cover. The faculty had to remain focused on the task at hand and to guide our students in the midst of the turmoil. Power point and handouts were almost non-existent for lectures; however, it was amazing how many of our students evacuated with their books and course syllabus. We pulled together and got it done. We graduated our class in January 2006."

Wendy Garretson "Since so many of the hospitals operating in New Orleans were closed, we had to utilize the remaining facilities in creative ways. At one clinical site, we had a night shift clinical reporting off to a day shift clinical, which actually turned out to be a fantastic learning experience for all."

Kim Uddo "Emotions were so stirred during the early working phases of regrouping and rebuilding the nursing school. Genuine concern was paramount for each other in our regrouped graduating class. My clinical group of students and I were lucky enough to find a new hospital 50 miles away from our previous hospital which was flood damaged. Everything was strange and difficult. Our support of each other in our little clinical group was essential and came first."

Joan Hodge "Charity students have since adopted a class motto that states, 'Rebuilding New Orleans, one nurse at a time,' and I can say this is what I felt before it was put into words. I knew that with the clinical and classroom support, the students would have a future and they could



**Fig. 6** CSN class T-shirt, back.

make a contribution to the community workforce [see Figs. 5 and 6]."

Evelyn Dodson "It wasn't until after classes started that I realized just how much I needed my students. I have always known that my students are important, but Katrina further defined what they really mean to me. I remember a student telling me how much she appreciated my coming back to help them graduate. Her gratitude for what is a calling for me brought tears to my eyes."

Joan Breeden "The compressed semester that we planned was hard work, but we the faculty and the students were in survival mode and it seemed like an adventure. We had many unique experiences. Working in tents (labeled the Spirit of Charity) with nurses and doctors from the Emergency Department at Charity Hospital, we felt like pioneers [see Figs. 7 and 8]. I have probably never enjoyed a group of students so much. But as the year(s) went on, and the difficulties and increased work load continued, it became very exhausting. I am sure much of it is emotional fatigue as we deal with a devastated community medical system, the overloaded medical system that is still functioning, and the personal losses of belongings, homes, and community."



**Fig. 5** Charity School of Nursing (CSN) class T-shirt, front.



**Fig. 7** Clinical group at "Spirit of Charity" tent.



## 8. Changed forever

Katrina has brought forth many changes in each of us and has also brought forth many revelations.

Joan Hodge “As we close out the spring semester of 2007, we can look back and say that it has been a marathon. All students who were enrolled in fall of 2005 semester were able to continue in their original curriculum pattern. Students and faculty are exhausted, since they only had a short summer break before resuming regular classes in the fall of 2006. What we see are students who not only have family and work responsibilities, but who are also dealing with all the problems and complexities of rebuilding a home in a city of limited resources. Many are still living with their families in small FEMA trailers and there is also the fatigue factor as a result of commuting from distant sites. Despite these changes and challenges, the first graduating class post Katrina had a 90% pass rate of NCLEX. This experience has left me awed by the human spirit and its ability to persevere.”

Wendy Garretson “I have such a profound respect for the students since Katrina. I wondered how some were able to make it through, despite losing their comforts of home and support systems. I watched as others had to withdraw, unable to complete the compressed semester amidst the turmoil. I praised each of them and am still amazed at their tenacity.”

Evelyn Dodson “Katrina has cleansed our hearts and our spirits; we are stronger and better for her. For all the bad that transpired during this time of trouble, much good has also evolved.”

Lynn Lowery “The storm forever changed my perspectives of life, in general, so this naturally changed the way I teach. I have more passion for people than ever. My lectures are on two thumb drives and both of my computers. I have copies of all the power points, notes and all related material on CDs also. The events that happened with the storm have also made me more appreciative of the role I play as an educator.”



Fig. 8 Student inside the “Spirit of Charity” tent.



Fig. 9 December 2005 class banner.

Kim Uddo “I learned during this emotional time that my students are people who have feelings, goals, desires, and dreams that are quite similar to mine. We have the same desires for their success in school, achievement of graduation, and to build happy lives. I am focused on becoming an instrument to assist them in a friendly (but still somewhat firm) way. I am not afraid to show feelings. I am dedicated to motivating them and encouraging them to reach their goals.”

Jill Lambert “This storm and the break of the levees resulting in the flooding of my world as a changing point in my personal life. I no longer have a strong need for material things. I live each day as if it would be my last. I attempt to be optimistic; I show my loved ones more



Fig. 10 July 2006 class banner.



**Fig. 11** The graduating class of December 2005.

affection; I laugh more, hug more, listen more, try to understand more. My teaching methods have changed also. Although my standards are still high and I still demand 110% from my students, I am more patient. I love nursing and want my students to feel about this profession as I do.”

Ann Nealy “I feel that I give so much more in each clinical experience. I want to empty out as much knowledge as I can to my students because tomorrow is not promised to any of us.”

Veronica Jean “My passion for teaching and student–teacher relations did not change at all. I enjoyed my

teaching career before as well as after the event. Experience has made me a more effective educator. The best reward was to see the graduates as they marched in to get their nursing pins.”

The fall semester of 2005 had started out like any other. Our school of nursing was blossoming with a day as well as an evening division. Although Katrina tore our world apart, we were able to regroup, to merge a day and evening division into one, to graduate our Level II sophomores with only a month delay (see Figs. 9–11). We continued on with our compressed semesters, working through the summer to get everyone back on track. Our graduating RN students of May 2007 were in Basics when Katrina hit. Thanks to the hard work of all, they have graduated on schedule. In a word, we are exhausted, we are proud, we are survivors!

## Acknowledgments

We would all like to express our sincere thanks to the countless individuals who supported us in every way. We especially thank our families and friends who opened their homes to us. We thank our CSN Administrators and our Chancellor, Dr. Alex Johnson, who always believed in his “esteemed faculty.” We will always remember the countless nursing programs across the country that opened their doors to many of our students, and to the students themselves, we applaud your willpower and dedication to CSN.