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**To:** gsnook  
**Date:** Tuesday, October 11, 2005 10:52:19 AM  
**Subject:** Fwd: Hurricanes Rita and Katrina -- A Nasty Pair

>>> "President: Robert M. Gates" <president@tamu.edu> 9/28/2005 1:35 PM >>>  
September 28, 2005

To: Faculty, Staff and Students

Subject: Hurricanes Rita and Katrina -- A Nasty Pair

For the second time in three weeks, Texas A&M University on September 20th mobilized to care for evacuees from a major hurricane -- Rita. This time was dramatically different than for Katrina because, as of mid-day on September 21st, Rita's path was projected to pass about 20 miles to the west of College Station, placing the campus on the "dirty" -- most dangerous -- side of the hurricane. So, we not only had to prepare for evacuees but also for a giant storm potentially to pass near or over the campus. As with Katrina, there would be many Aggie heroes over the days to follow.

A second major difference from Katrina was that Texas A&M was asked to convert the large animal hospital at the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences into a facility to care for several hundred "special needs" patients from Houston and Galveston. The hospital was emptied of animals, sanitized and converted to human use in less than a day thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Dean Richard Adams, Dr. Bill Moyer (head of the Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences), Dr. Dean Gage, Dr. Debbie Kochevar, and scores of other faculty, staff and students -- all volunteers.

By Friday night, the night before the hurricane was due to make landfall, the huge facility housed some 650 patients, families and caregivers, and had become the largest human hospital in central Texas. The 350 patients included a number of recovering badly-burned children from Shriners' Hospital in Galveston, geriatric patients from nursing homes, and physically handicapped children. Everyone pitched in, as doctors, nurses, medical and veterinary students, and many other staff and student volunteers did whatever needed to be done -- from medical treatment to changing diapers -- to make the patients comfortable and to care for them. The medical care was supervised by Dr. Paul Carlton of the Health Science Center (and a former Surgeon General of the U.S. Air Force), and his team included many other HSC staff as well as representatives of the Centers for Disease Control, the Public Health Service, FEMA, and the Army -- which brought and deployed an entire Army Field Hospital equipped to treat 500 patients. University Food Services also played a critical role in keeping everyone fed. In all this -- remembering the aftermath of Katrina -- was an unnoticed minor miracle: so many federal, state, local, university and A&M System agencies and organizations, and so much cooperation and teamwork. Rank and title were meaningless. All had but one common purpose -- to care for the most vulnerable among us.

The sights at the hospital ranged from the amusing (a full professor driving a forklift truck to move a porta-potty) to the inspiring (Dr. Nancy Dickey, President of the HSC and a former President of the American Medical Association, in her scrubs spending all the first night giving a physician's touch to many patients), to the deeply moving (Dr. Evelyn Castiglioni, head of Integrative Biosciences and Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs who, as an accomplished harpist, relaxed patients with an impromptu concert, entertaining especially the post-burn recovery children, who then themselves played the harp - including the children missing their fingers). To walk those halls was to experience the whole range of human emotions - pride and joy in seeing what A&M was doing to save lives and to care for the handicapped, the sick, and the elderly; sorrow at seeing so many torn by the storm from familiar surroundings; tears at the courage and resilience of the badly burned little children; humor at the efforts of so many to bring a smile to faces young and old; admiration for the dedication of so many, working through fatigue. Humility in the presence of so many heroes.

The hospital is nearly empty now, soon to be returned to its four-legged patients. But those who were there during Hurricane Rita will never forget what happened in that special place during six days in September, 2005.

Once again, we were called upon to shelter evacuees in Reed Arena. Once again, I called upon Lt. Gen. John Van Alstyne, Colonel Jake Betty, and the Corps of Cadets to shoulder the lion's share of the burden. And what a task it turned out to be. During Hurricane Katrina, we sheltered about 450 evacuees. During Rita, by Friday night, Reed held more than a thousand - and many of their pets. This time, the cots not only covered the entire floor, but also the practice gym, and the corridors on all three levels.

Once again, many campus organizations and hundreds of individual volunteers participated, providing medical care, child care, fresh linens and towels, food, and more. The Aggie Dance Team again established and operated the supply distribution center; the Sigma Phi Lambda sorority operated a first-class child care center; residents of Lechner and Hart halls repeatedly volunteered, along with many from other halls; and the Aggie Emergency Care Team provided the best of emergency medical services 24/7. There were many other Aggie heroes at Reed during those long days and nights. An inevitably incomplete list must include: Dr. Wynn Rosser of Student Affairs, who seemed to be everywhere all the time; Cory Arcak of the Forsyth Gallery and Dr. Darby Roberts of Student Life Studies, who pitched in everywhere and touched the lives of so many; Lt. Col. Jim Harrison, a logistics officer who performed miracles; cadets like Jordan Smith, who worked countless hours; and, most especially, Lloyd Crouch and Keith Richards from Food Services, who remained at Reed for nearly 48 hours straight, cooking around the clock for over 1,000 evacuees, with little external support. The list goes on and on with people from every corner of the University. Heroes all.

There were heroes among the evacuees as well. They included Ms. Alva Wills, age 95, "Ms. Katie", also 95, and Mr. Siddell Rabb, an 80 year

old African-American veteran of World War II, all of whom taught everyone at Reed about growing old with grace and style, and never losing hope, kindness or dignity; Rose Hinajosa of Corpus Christi who, discontented with just sitting around, volunteered and was invaluable as an interpreter, the children, who kept going and going and... going at this great party; a group of Hispanic ladies who could not speak English but whose repeated tearful thanks upon departure brought tears to the strongest Aggies. A thousand stories. More heroes.

I need to mention two other organizations. First, the staff of the Office of Environmental Health and Safety, led by Chris Meyer. Chris was, for all practical purposes, A&M's crisis manager for all of the services we were providing, through long days and nights overseeing all of the various activities in which we were involved and, at the same time, serving as our vital link to county, state and federal authorities. Second, the University Police Department and its chief, Eimer Schneider. On duty at both Reed Arena and the hospital 24/7, still carrying out all their regular protective and law enforcement responsibilities - these incredibly professional men and women, who really care, should make every Aggie proud.

Another difference with Katrina: our campus became a major staging point for rescuers. 450 National Guard troops stayed at the Student Recreation Center Friday and Saturday nights, the parking lot at Olsen Field filled with Army and Air Force trucks, humvees, and numerous semi-trailer trucks loaded with supplies and equipment. We prepared to host 800 members of Texas Task Force 1 at G. Rollie White, but when on Thursday Rita thankfully began to move well to the east of us, the Task Force deployed onward to Houston. Rick Hall and James Nash from Rec Sports and Mike Tomchesson from Health and Kinesiology played critical roles in these preparations along with James Massey and Chuck Ray of Facilities Coordination. And, of course, we cared for hundreds of pets at the Pearce Pavilion.

I need to note as well the many faculty, staff and students who volunteered their time and efforts in the local community and in churches to help evacuees. And a number of student groups have sponsored campaigns on campus to gather supplies for evacuees and to raise money for relief efforts and the victims.

While so many faculty, students and staff were caring around the clock for evacuees and patients - serving others, we also had to prepare to take care of ourselves as we waited to see how close the hurricane would come. Folks from the Facilities Division checked and deployed back-up generators, sandbagged buildings prone to flooding, dispersed heavy equipment around campus, secured all objects around campus that might become projectiles in high winds, and so much more. Maintenance and repair crews remained on campus to ride out the storm and do whatever was necessary to deal quickly with possible damage. Chuck Sippial (Vice President for Facilities), along with Les Swick, George Parker and Jim Riley and countless others in the Facilities Division were there to look out for all of us who remained on campus - and for the campus itself.

What worried us most was the danger to our branch campus in Galveston, which was so long in the bulls-eye of Rita. Under the leadership of

Dean of Undergraduate Studies Dr. Mark Weichold and TAMU-Galveston CEO Dr. Bowen Loftin, a wonderful team of people spent most of last week mapping out how we would absorb all 1700 of our Galveston students whose faculty would re-create their curriculum in College Station until damage to their campus was repaired. Thankfully, all that work would prove to be unneeded. And all this on top of the effort just three weeks ago to receive and enroll some 350 displaced students from Louisiana and Mississippi universities and colleges after Katrina.

Perhaps the toughest decision for me as we prepared for Rita was whether to encourage students to remain on campus. I did so on Wednesday afternoon, persuaded by experts that the storm would weaken considerably by the time it reached Bryan/College Station and that students were safer in our sturdy buildings with back-up power, communications, medical care and security, than on the road or even at home. (We have encouraged faculty to grant university excused absences to those students who left prior to Friday to help their families prepare for Rita or who did not return by Sunday night because they were helping family recover or simply could not return because of the lack of gasoline.)

The second toughest decision was whether to cancel the football game with Texas State or move it up to Thursday night. For those of you who thought I should have cancelled the game, your view was shared by about half of the senior administrators in the University. I was pretty torn myself, and finally opted to move the game up because of the strong desire of our student-athletes to play and because so many students wanted to attend. However, I had another, more substantial motive in moving the game to Thursday night. I believed playing the game would encourage more students to remain on campus, where I was convinced they would be safest during the storm. As it turned out, the student 12th Man turned out in force for the game, some 26,000 of them nearly filling the east side of the stadium. And, judging from the rest of Kyle Field, most non-local former students and fans stayed home and off the highways, as I had asked.

Well, our students have had quite an experience. The first month of school has been dramatically interrupted by these two hurricanes and by A&M's response to each. Still, classes have been meeting (except for last Friday), we are a month into the semester, and mid-terms are coming soon. Students need to hit the books hard, and I ask faculty to remember what the last month has been like for all of us – especially the students. It was a different, and difficult, start to the school year.

Together, we have been through an extraordinary four weeks. A four week period where, above all, our students – but also many faculty and staff – once again showed Texas, and the whole nation, the meaning of our Aggie culture and Spirit. Where an entire campus opened its arms and its heart not just once, but twice, to those fleeing disaster. Where different agencies, different organizations, different student groups, different parts of the University came together to help strangers from every walk of life. Where those who gave of themselves, and those who received were, in different ways, changed forever. Where today's students proved the Aggie Spirit endures, undiminished.

Let us all hope and pray we never have to go through this again. But let no Aggie ever forget September, 2005. Four weeks when Texas A&M University added another extraordinary chapter to its unique history of selfless service to Texas and to America.

Robert M. Gates  
President