First-Hand Thoughts on the Storm
Lisl Zach
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Initially, those at the Times-Picayune had hoped to stay. The newspaper managers had hoped to be able to provide essential, breaking news during the immediate days after Katrina, even though many other news outlets had fled. Despite the loss of electricity and phone lines, the building had a generator to keep computers and presses operating. But by 10 p.m. that Monday, the Lakeview levee had been breached near the 17th Street canal—one of many levees that eventually flooded the city. By early the next morning, water was rising rapidly throughout New Orleans. The newspaper’s publisher, Ashton Phelps Jr., ordered the evacuation of everyone from the Times-Picayune building. They were to leave together via the loading docks and drive out of the city on the newspaper’s delivery trucks.

“Nobody was injured,” Hightower reported of those who had remained that Monday night. Taking laptops and other portable necessities, they abandoned the Times-Picayune building.

The Tuesday newspaper was never printed, but the publisher, editors, and reporters were determined to continue collecting and distributing the news. They were in the middle of the worst natural disaster in American history and they were determined to get the information out to the public. Hightower remained with them; he wanted to help any way he could. Hightower’s duties had been working in digital archiving, primarily PDF files, and managing the real estate collection.

On the Road
That Tuesday morning, Hightower was part of a 12-member team that traveled to Houma, Louisiana, 57 miles southwest of New Orleans. The Houma Courier offered a place for his associates to eat, use the computers, contact their families, and, equally important, get a newspaper out. The plan was to produce the Times-Picayune in a PDF format—but the layout would be that of a traditional newspaper—and upload it to the NOLA.com Web site.

“I did things that night I never did before,” Hightower said. “I worked with [the Courier’s] IT people. They were awesome, everyone there. They fed us spaghetti... jambalaya. They took care of us.”

The first PDF of the Times-Picayune was published and uploaded to the Web site for Wednesday distribution: 17 articles, one editorial, and 12 photographs. Hightower’s job became clear: “I became responsible in getting material on NOLA.com, making sure everything got out.”

After a long day and night in Houma—and after a restless sleep filled with nightmares of water rising all around him—Hightower and his associates were sent to Baton Rouge, some 65 miles north of Houma, which escaped the brunt of Katrina. They rejoined the rest of the Times-Picayune staff in getting the newspaper printed again while continuing coverage via the PDF format paper. By Friday of that week—again, with the assistance of The Houma Courier—the Times-Picayune began printing at least 50,000 copies of a condensed newspaper, one-fifth its normal circulation run. The staff was determined to continue producing and delivering a daily newspaper, and Hightower was alongside his associates, sharing that quest.

But like his associates—and hundreds of thousands of others in that region—he found himself in another city and homeless. More than 225,000 evacuees went to Baton Rouge, doubling the population within days.

Through a quick series of chance meetings and calls with other SLA members in the area, Hightower connected with Lisl Zach, president of the SLA Louisiana Southern Mississippi Chapter and an assistant professor at the School of Library and Information Science at Louisiana State University. She and her husband immediately opened every room of their house to Hightower and other evacuees who needed to have

Lisl Zach is an assistant professor at Louisiana State University and president of the Louisiana/Southern Mississippi Chapter of SLA. The following are her thoughts as the recovery from Hurricane Katrina began.

Obviously, our first thoughts as information professionals must go to all the people who have suffered personal loss and dislocation as a result of the hurricane.

I watched the disaster unfold in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast from the relative comfort of Baton Rouge—while there was some damage around town, power was back on for most people within a couple of days.

We had been getting the early waves of evacuees since the Friday before the storm, and by Tuesday, when the situation in New Orleans became desperate, almost everybody I knew was housing a cousin or an aunt or a friend of a friend. My attention, as soon as I had access to the Internet, was focused on connecting with as many of our Louisiana/Southern Mississippi Chapter members as possible.

We got the first message out to our membership on Tuesday evening; the response was not encouraging—more than 40 percent of the e-mails were returned as undeliverable. On Wednesday, I started hearing back from a few people in the chapter as well as from concerned SLA national members.

Ray Robertson of the SLA Task Force on Natural Disasters contacted me about helping to coordinate their outreach effort to members affected by the disaster, and I worked with John Crosby of the SLA staff to draft a message to the local chapter membership expressing SLA’s willingness to help out

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The 17th Street Canal stretches southward between Jefferson and Orleans Parishes in this aerial photo taken Sunday, September 4. The uncompleted bridge in the foreground enabled Corps of Engineers contracts to drive sheet piling to close off the canal from Lake Ponchartrain. Looking down the canal, the breach into Orleans Parish is visible. The skyline of New Orleans lies in the distance. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo by Alan Dooley)

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in any way appropriate. The IPANDA Web site was updated to carry offers of assistance from SLA members around the country. I was personally touched by the messages that I received, both from colleagues I knew in the Museum, Arts, and Humanities Division and from SLA members I had never met, offering their thoughts, prayers, and practical help during this stressful time.

As the days have passed, we have heard from many, but not all of our chapter members, and I trust that we will learn soon that all have found safe havens. I was lucky to be able to offer a place to stay to a displaced librarian from the Times-Picayune (an ex-student), so I have had a unique first-hand experience watching how our members have responded to this crisis with resourcefulness and good spirits.

I have heard from friends and colleagues who have ended up as far afield as Pittsburgh and Northern Virginia, but who are only waiting for the opportunity to return to the area and get back to their collections. We have been very encouraged to learn that many of these collections have come through the devastation without major damage, although we also fear that many have been lost.

It will be the work of weeks, months, and even years to restore and rebuild these collections. While this experience has been a great tragedy, it has taught us much about the power of our professional network and the strength of our community. As president of the LaSoMi chapter, I want to thank all the people at SLA headquarters and the membership at large for their support and encouragement during these difficult times.