

**Hurricanes Katrina and Rita**  
**A Reporter's Notebook**  
**By Mike Hoss**

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Forward

I have never kept a log or a diary in my life, but in the hours and days before and after Hurricane Katrina hit, I started writing down the events and challenges we faced each day. I knew if I didn't do that, I would never remember what we did and when. Our lives changed so quickly and dramatically after the storm. I don't know why I did it, but I'm so glad I did. At first I was just writing so that I could chronicle the work we did following the hurricane, but after a couple of weeks the diary became almost therapeutic for me. I was living in Baton Rouge in an apartment with colleagues and away from my family, working 14 to 16 hour days. We didn't have a television or a computer, so after work each night before bed, I would write down what happened that day. It was a way for me to put into words some of the emotions we were all feeling at that time. It was a gut wrenching time in our lives, and one I hope we never have to endure again.

Thursday, August 25<sup>th</sup>

Man, I need to mow my grass....I stood there with my arms folded looking out the back door of my house. It was Thursday afternoon, my grass was getting long, and I was trying to figure out when I would get a chance to cut it. No big deal, I thought, I'll get to it soon, this weekend at the latest. Out in the Gulf of Mexico was Hurricane Katrina, but she was supposed to go up the western side of Florida and wasn't going to affect us at all. But just the fact that the storm moved into the Gulf kicked in our family Hurricane plan. My wife Betty-Ann already had room reservations for her and our two kids, 6 year old Allison and 4

year old Katie, in Jackson, Mississippi. Because of my work situation at Channel 4, we have to do all of our Hurricane preparations long before everyone else. If a storm gets close enough to where the city would be talking about evacuating, that would also be about the time I would have to go into work. So that means I have to haul all my yard stuff, bikes, picnic tables and chairs into my garage days before the storm is really a threat to us. I've still got some items left in the yard so I spend the rest of the morning putting everything away and preparing the house for a storm that's not supposed to come anywhere near us.

Friday August, 26<sup>th</sup>

By Friday morning Hurricane Katrina had shifted to the West some but the weathercasters were talking about the Florida panhandle or maybe Mobile. My brother-in-law, Ron Redmann, has a beach house in Navarre Beach, Florida and I thought wow, they're going to get it again. He's been hit three times in the last two years, and it looked like they would feel some effects of Katrina. My News Director at Channel Four, Sandy Breland, called around 9:30 in the morning to see if I wanted to go and cover the storm. I did want to cover it but it meant me leaving soon, and I couldn't do it because I had my daughter Katie with me, and Betty-Ann was at work so I had to pass. I felt horribly guilty about it, but there just wasn't anything I could do. I explained that to my bosses at work when I got in around 2:00pm, and they totally understood. Hurricane Katrina dominated talk around the newsroom that day because of the shift to the West. But there wasn't a real panic about the storm, because we really weren't in the cone of where they thought the storm would make landfall.

The National Weather Service puts out the new coordinates and track of a hurricane every 6 hours, and the next track would come out at 4:00pm. That's when our lives changed. The new track had us right in the cone. Hurricane Katrina had shifted some 150 miles to the West and New Orleans was looking like it could take a direct hit. We had never heard of a storm shifting so far so

quickly. People in the newsroom immediately started calling for hotel reservations. My co-anchor and great friend Karen Swensen was really in a tough spot. She and her New Orleans Police officer husband John, have a beautiful 2 year old daughter named Catherine Grace. But Karen and John would both be working through the storm, so they had to find a family member to take Catherine with them when they evacuated. I knew that was going to be very difficult for Karen to do, but she really had no choice. By late Friday afternoon she had a plan underway for someone in John's family to take Catherine to Jackson, Mississippi.

We knew that by the top of the 5:00 o'clock news, when this story hit, hotel rooms would be scarce. That is something everyone learned as a result of Hurricane Ivan the year before, when basically the entire city evacuated. If you didn't get a hotel reservation fast you would have no place to evacuate to. And that's what happened. Hurricane Katrina was our top story at five o'clock with the new track, and by 5:30pm people in the newsroom were finding it difficult to secure a room.

But again there wasn't a real sense of panic. The storm wasn't supposed to make landfall until sometime Monday morning so we all felt there would be time for this storm to move. Previous storms like George in 1998 and Ivan last year were coming at us, and then faded to the East as they approached Louisiana sparing most of Louisiana the devastating damage. And I think people felt it would do that again this time. There wasn't a sense of panic, but we were definitely in Hurricane Preparation mode at the station. Everyone was told to come in Saturday with enough clothes to last three days. Crews were dispatched to the East to be in position to cover the storm wherever she hit.

### **Saturday, August 27th**

Hurricane Katrina is huge, a Category 3 storm and the forecast still has New Orleans in her path. But her track, I think, is misleading and it's going to play a

role in whether people leave or not. Right now Katrina is moving to the West-southwest. She is not moving towards Louisiana at all, but over the next two days she is expected to eventually turn to the North towards us. I think because the storm was not moving right at us, people felt they would have time to get out or that maybe she would not turn and spare us again.

Unbelievably on this Saturday morning, I'm sitting with my entire family at Metairie Bank signing on a second mortgage on my house. The interest rates were going up on a loan we had, so we decided to lock into a rate, and today was our closing. Betty-Ann and I talked about putting a second mortgage on a house that we weren't even sure would be there in a few days. I don't think we really believed it, but it was kind of strange to be signing such paperwork with the storm so close.

The plan at this point was for Betty-Ann and the girls to leave early Sunday morning, around 4:00am. That would give them time to see what the storm was going to do, and still get them out of town early enough to avoid the traffic leaving the city. Fortunately Betty-Ann would not be alone. Most of her entire family was evacuating with her. Her mom, her two sisters and a brother had all made reservations at this hotel in Jackson, Mississippi. It was a Studio Plus. We had never even heard of it before, but it had a little kitchen in it and a pool for the kids. We figured it would just be for a few days anyway.

We thought Jackson would be far enough away from the storm to avoid the big hit. It would have been better to be farther West for Katrina, but we had to make our reservations so early, we felt this would be the best place. We expected to lose power but Jackson is a big city and the State Capitol, so we knew they would work quickly to get power back on to that area.

I packed my bag the night before, and by 11:00 in the morning I'm heading out the door for work. Saying good-bye was hard that morning because I just didn't know when I would see my wife and kids again. I knew it would be several days at the least. Allison and Katie didn't know what was happening; only that Daddy was going to work and wouldn't be coming home that night. We told them they

were going on a Mississippi vacation to a hotel where they could eat McDonald's and swim all day. If you have kids, you know that swimming and McDonald's is a tough combination for kids to turn down. I just wanted them out of town quickly. Traveling with two young kids is hard on just one parent, and I knew there would be very few places to stop for gas and food along the way, especially leaving at 4:00 in the morning. The last thing I did before I left the house was grab a few plums and a large jar of roasted peanuts. I have been on a low carb diet for more than two years and peanuts often got me through the rough spots of hunger. When I got to work we were making plans to start our continuous coverage and at noon Eric Paulsen kicked off our coverage.

We would be round the clock from this point. My job at that point was to go out and talk to people filling their gas tanks leaving town. That was easy, they were everywhere. I went down to Carrollton Avenue and cars were waiting in the street to get gas. Some people were filling up to head out of town; others were getting the fuel they needed to ride out the storm. They were putting gas in anything with a lid. I talked to a couple of young ambulance drivers from Tulane University. They were volunteers who said they would stay and make calls to help people around campus. Saturday August 28<sup>th</sup>, was also the day that Tulane Freshman arrived on campus. I couldn't believe what those parents must have been going through coming from all over the nation to drop their kid off at a new school during a hurricane evacuation with a category 4 or 5 storm coming right at them. Do you leave, do you stay? If you leave, where do you go? You don't have hotel reservations and by Saturday afternoon, you weren't going to find any anywhere. What a dilemma. I truly felt for the parents and those teenagers who waited all summer to embark on college life in the Big Easy.

Let me explain a little bit about continuous coverage on television. There are no scripts, no teleprompter, just information and a constant flow of reporters, weathercasters and telephone interviews. The whole production is generally run by the producers downstairs in the control room, as they tell the anchors in their ear what's coming up next. You might be talking about a levee in Plaquemines

Parish and then the producer says O.K now go to Senator Mary Landrieu on the telephone. It all happens very fast. There's no time to prepare for what's coming next, because sometimes we don't always *know* what's coming next. The producers are our lifeline. They are directing the show in our ears. In these situations, if you see a news anchor talking but there's this glassy look on their face like they're a little lost, that's usually because a producer is talking in their ear about what's coming next. Sticking to whatever thought you are talking about while someone is talking about something else in your ear is tricky. But that's the way this coverage is. It isn't pretty. It's providing the best information people need at a critical time.

Obviously, continuous coverage in the days before the storm was devoted to the meteorologists trying to forecast where this monster was heading. It's what these guys went to school and trained for. It's their Super Bowl. Man, Carl Arredondo and John Gumm were under a lot of pressure. Our morning weatherman David Bernard had left a month earlier for a job in Miami, so going around the clock with just two guys was going to be difficult. Again, as Anchors we leaned pretty heavily on those guys during this time. In a normal newscast they might get 3 minutes, maybe 3 and a half. But in continuous coverage it's almost unlimited. And what we all wanted to know this Saturday afternoon was Katrina's final destination. A question they obviously couldn't answer exactly, but nothing they had in their computers or the track from the National Hurricane Center was going to shift her too far to the east or west of New Orleans.

After getting back from the lines at gas stations, I quickly put together some packages of the day's events. A package is a television term for "the story". I did two packages on people's frustrations with all the lines getting gas and getting out of town, and another on just their mindset about staying or leaving. As soon as a reporter finishes the story, they get up to the news desk as soon as possible to give the anchors a much needed break. Dennis Woltering and Karen Swensen were anchoring at the time. Angela Hill was away on vacation and

unable to get back, so the three of us were rotating the afternoon, evening and overnight anchor shifts.

We had a live camera positioned so we could check out the traffic heading out of town to the East and West on Interstate 10. Late in the afternoon the much talked about contra-flow system went into effect. It was such a disaster during the evacuation of Ivan everybody wanted to see if it would work this time. The traffic heading west on I-10 would cross over around Causeway Blvd. and Clearview Pkwy. If you crossed over into the left lanes, what used to be I-10 East, you were going to be heading towards Baton Rouge. If you stayed to the right you had no choice but to head up Interstate 55 towards Jackson, Mississippi. From the moment contraflow began Saturday afternoon, I'd say about 75 percent of the cars were heading to the west towards Baton Rouge and Texas. Emergency officials always stress moving to the north and away from the storm, but many people are just used to heading west for whatever reason. But for the most part, it looked like contraflow was working pretty well, at least a lot better than it did during Hurricane Ivan.

By around 9:00 that evening, Karen Swensen and I were on the anchor desk. We had reporters all over the area doing traffic stories and talking to people boarding up their houses. Around 10:00pm Mayor Ray Nagin stopped by the set to give us the latest details. It was grim news. He said he talked to someone high up at the National Weather Service who told him basically it was going to be catastrophic damage. The mayor said he couldn't legally order a mandatory evacuation at the time but basically did so. He told all citizens to get out of town. He also told residents, as we had, to try and get some of the many people in the city who didn't have a way out of town. We knew there would be thousands who wouldn't or couldn't leave.

I remember it being one of those moments (and there were several) where the reality of the storm began to set in. Hurricane Katrina was not going to miss us and everything at this point said it was going to be a direct hit. The mayor spent about a half an hour with us that night on the air pleading with people to leave

and talking about the City's plan. The Superdome was going to be used as a shelter of last resort only.

Meteorologist John Gumm, had recently been promoted from weekends to do the morning show and his wife was about to give birth to their first child. Things were really going great for him and he was happy.

But around 10:00pm Saturday night with Hurricane Katrina gaining strength and heading right towards New Orleans, John got the call. Jennifer was going into labor. Wow. We were very happy for him but we knew how hard it was going to be for him to leave under this situation. The station, knowing we were going to be down a person because of David Bernard, had arranged to get Brad Panovich from our sister station in Charlotte to fly in and help. Brad worked for us a few years before taking the job in Charlotte. When John got the word, he told Carl to get ready as he was leaving for the hospital. Carl, a real trooper, was ready and took over until Brad got up and running. I can't imagine what was going through Carl's and Brad's minds at this point, knowing it was just going to be the two of them to carry us through the storm.

I know John felt horrible about leaving, but everyone, including management said, hey it's your first child, goodbye and best of luck, and get back when you can. Our station is truly great that way. It's a very demanding job, but at Channel Four, family doesn't come second. A lot of stations may say that but Channel Four actually does it.

It was around 11:00pm Saturday night, but because the storm wasn't supposed to hit until 24 hours later, anywhere from late Sunday night into early Monday morning, we had to start letting some of the reporters in the field take a break so they would be ready to hit the ground early in the morning because then we'd likely be awake straight through.

## Sunday, August 28<sup>th</sup>

Karen had been anchoring for many hours, so around midnight Dennis relieved her and she went and got a couple of hours sleep. Dennis and I had the task of taking things through until 6:00 in the morning with basically no reporters in the field. We knew it wasn't going to be easy but really the only people everyone wanted to hear from was the meteorologists. Brad Panovich had arrived and jumped into the fray like he never left. He truly did a great job considering he hadn't been saying any of our quirky New Orleans lingo in a couple of years.

Dennis and I did a few phone interviews with Emergency Operations Directors from around the area, but it was a long night and morning. Dennis and I had never actually anchored together for one minute, and now we were wrapping up around 7 hours together. He's an experienced true professional.

Hurricane Katrina didn't do much overnight and that was bad news. She was moving at New Orleans now, and any sudden shift in her track according to Brad and Carl didn't seem likely.

At 6:00am Eric and Sally-Ann took over on the anchor desk as Dennis and I dragged off to find a couple of hours of sleep.

Because of the crazy day on Saturday and the long anchor shift, I really hadn't eaten much in close to 24 hours. There was some cold pizza in the newsroom and I grabbed a couple of slices on my way out. They were awesome, or I was very hungry. When you're on a low carb diet it doesn't get much better than bread or dough.

The station had reserved several rooms at the Hyatt Regency Hotel next to the Superdome and I went over to check in and get a little sleep. The skies were already cloudy and the wind was picking up. I parked my car on the third floor of a parking garage near the hotel figuring it would be safe here for the length of the storm. I checked in and by 7:00pm was asleep.

I was awakened at 10:00am by the sound of my cell phone ringing. It was our assignment editor Greg Phillips who called to say we were having a staff meeting

soon and to come in. I was a little groggy about the need for a meeting but sloshed down some coffee and jumped in the shower. After the shower, I looked out of my Hyatt Hotel room on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. The wind had picked up even more and it was just ugly and grey outside.

I looked to the South where the storm was right then and wondered what she would do to New Orleans. I got down on my knees that morning in the hotel room and prayed for Katrina to spare New Orleans. I'm not the most emotional guy when it comes to things like this, but the depth of this storm and her impact was really affecting me.

I knew getting to the station was not going to be easy. I didn't want to take my car because I didn't want it at the station where we felt flooding was going to be a problem.

So I walked out into the street and starting trying to flag down a cab. There weren't very many of them out there, but I found a guy who at least stopped and I told him I'd give him 20 dollars to take me a mile to Channel Four. He agreed, and also picked up two people visiting New Orleans from New York for the weekend. They were trying to find a store that was open to get some food and supplies to ride out the storm. They said they were trapped, couldn't get a rental car, and their flight had been canceled. I told them some places to get some food and wished them luck. They seemed a little amazed that someone was heading into work at a time like this.

When I walked into the newsroom, the meeting had already started and it was like walking into a funeral. The News Director Sandy Breland was talking to the staff about the storm and the station's plans. Most people had this blank stare while others fought back tears. It was an unbelievable moment. We stood together as a staff and family knowing now that this thing was coming at us and she was big and powerful. She was not going to turn and miss the New Orleans area. We were going to feel her some way or another.

A couple of years earlier, in a stroke of genius, the station had entered into an agreement with LSU's Communications Department in Baton Rouge to utilize the

school's broadcast facility as another studio in case we needed it. Management had come up with the plan to split the staff in two, sending some to Baton Rouge while keeping a crew to ride it out and cover the storm here. I was on the team to stay and ride it out in the Hyatt. We would keep the broadcast in our French Quarter studios as long as possible until the storm forced us to take shelter, and then we'd hand it over to the team standing by in Baton Rouge. They would take us through the storm until we could regroup and get back on the air. It was a great plan, and we were lucky to have an alternative site already worked out well before the storm even hit.

As Sandy read out the list of who was going where, the enormity of what was happening really hit me. My family was 3 ½ hours away, I didn't know when I'd see them again. I was worried about our house, but truly just worried that the New Orleans that we know might not exist in 24 hours. My eyes welled up with tears and I avoided eye contact with everyone in the newsroom. I went across the alley into the next building where the sports office is to try and pull it together and gather my thoughts. I knew any emotion I was having then could not work its way on the air. People needed to be calm and make rational decisions, and I knew I had just needed a little time to "get over it".

Because the traffic was backing up everywhere, the Baton Rouge team had to get on the road as soon as possible. Everyone hugged and said good-bye and good luck and we split up. Eric and Sally-Ann were anchoring at the time but they had to get going to Baton Rouge so they told Karen and me to go up and anchor. Everything was happening so fast, we didn't have any material, any notes from the wire or anything. We just went upstairs and starting anchoring.

On Sunday afternoon the Superdome, that was only going to be a shelter of last resort, was opening and there were buses picking people up around the city and bringing them to the Superdome. We figured a few thousand would utilize the building but we had no idea at that time the number of people that would end up there. There was a steady stream of cars on the Interstate heading Westbound and Eastbound all day, but the real traffic headaches came on some

of the other roadways. Airline Highway, which is one of the roads emergency officials begged people to use instead of the interstate, was wall-to-wall cars heading towards Baton Rouge. The Baton Rouge team was phoning into the station every half hour or so to give us updates and it would take them an hour to go a couple of miles.

Karen and I anchored together until 4:00 in the afternoon. Then Dennis took over, and he and Karen kept going. Dennis' wife and family had evacuated to Memphis. I was due back on the air around 8:00 that night, but at this point things around the city were starting to shut down in preparation of the storm. I grabbed a little something to eat and sat at my desk and tried to work on the computer. It was a very surreal time. Karen and Dennis were anchoring and all of the reporters were out in the field. I was one of about 5 or 6 people in the whole newsroom. It was eerily quiet with a Category 5 storm bearing down on us.

I was able to check in on Betty-Ann and the girls and I knew they were safe and sound in Jackson, Mississippi. It was not a real pleasant conversation, as I could hear the fear in Betty-Ann's voice as we talked. She knew I wouldn't do anything dumb trying to cover the storm, but nobody really knew what was going to happen. All she knew is that I was riding the storm out in a downtown hotel. We both knew that the communication lines would be down and that we wouldn't talk for a few days. Not knowing if I was going to be safe was hard on her, 3 hours away with the kids. I promised her I wouldn't take any foolish chances and told her I would call when I could. We said we loved each other and said good-bye. Being the wife of a news anchor has its perks, but its drawbacks as well, and not having me there in a time of need is I'm sure, at the top of the list.

When I returned to the anchor desk around 8:15pm, the coastline was already feeling the effects of Katrina. The storm just hadn't moved much in the last two days. A wobble here or a wobble there, but for the most part it just kept coming right at us. What we watched, and what we generally always watch is, the 90 degree line. New Orleans basically sits at 90 degrees latitude, and Carl and

Brad said we didn't want the storm to cross to the west side of 90 degrees. They said if that happened, and the storm kept coming at us, it would put the City on the wetter, more dangerous, Eastern side of the storm. Katrina was moving closer to the 90 degree line with every update, but she hadn't quite gotten there.

Karen and some of the others went off to the Hyatt to get ready for a long night. Again, our plan was for Dennis and me to anchor as long as we could until the weather got so bad we would have to leave the station. We assumed that would be sometime after midnight. But at 11:15pm or so, as we were interviewing Kenner Mayor Phil Capitano, the producer said in our ears, "wrap it up we're out of here". Dennis and I thought, alright, a couple of more questions and then we'll move onto the next person. But then again we heard, this time more forceful, "wrap it up now, we're leaving...Sandy's in here and she says to finish the interview". Dennis and I hastily wrapped up the interview, and looked at each other like what the hell is going on. We then tossed to Eric and Sally-Ann in Baton Rouge, as they would continue our coverage. I don't think it was the smoothest toss in the world, but we were signing off. It wasn't the weather, but we got word at the station that if we didn't get to the hotel soon, they were going to be locking the doors in preparation for the storm.

When Dennis and I left the studio, we walked into pure chaos. People were running around loading into vans in our parking lot. We were "bugging out" and were going to caravan to the hotel. I've never seen our News Director Sandy Breland more focused. She was counting heads to make sure everyone was there. People were screaming, running around trying to grab one more item. We didn't know if we would ever see the place again. I ran to my desk and loaded up one box of stuff to take; mostly pictures of my family that sit around my desk, and any tapes of previous work. What do you put in one box after 17 years at a station? We jumped into the vans and headed off. Man that was a crazy time but we were really looking out for each other, making sure we were all there, making sure we had what we would need for the next day or two.

We got to the hotel in time. In fact what the hotel was doing, was evacuating people from their rooms into these huge ballrooms in the middle of the hotel. The Hyatt Hotel is virtually nothing but glass all the way around. Every room has these big pane glass windows, and the hotel was worried that the wind would shatter the glass or just suck it out of the building. I didn't really think that would happen but the hotel didn't appear to be giving us a choice. I ran up to my room on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor to get a pillow, blanket, briefcase and rain suit. I figured I better take my rain suit now because I didn't think they would let us back into our rooms any time soon, and the storm was starting to hit. The hotel was evacuating by floor, and it was a slow arduous process. The elevators took forever, which surprised me because I didn't think there were many people there. I thought it would just be Channel 4 people, and the few who couldn't get out of town. I did know the Mayor and his staff were holding up there, as well as the top brass of the New Orleans Police Department, but I still didn't expect a lot of people. This voice would come over the loudspeaker urging everyone to proceed quietly to the ballroom.

As I waited for my floor to be called, I sat there staring out the window. The rain was falling sideways because of the wind and you couldn't see much. My window looked out towards the Superdome and the Interstate. I didn't see any cars on the I-10 at this point, and I could barely make out the Superdome. I thought my God, this is it. As I stood there I realized it was after midnight. It was now August 29<sup>th</sup>, *my birthday*.

### **Monday, August 29th**

When they called my floor, I headed out towards the Ballrooms. I talked to Karen Swensen on her cell phone and she said to just come into the ballroom and look to the right for the Channel Four family. When I got downstairs, there were people everywhere. I couldn't believe it. The New Orleans Police Department had their own ballroom and it was packed. When I walked into our Ballroom my

jaw hit the floor. The floor was covered with people. I mean there must have been 1,500 to 2000 people, sitting on blankets, talking and watching television. It was around 12:30 in the morning now, but no one was sleeping. Finding the Channel Four family, though, was easy, because our family was so large. I figure we had 60 people with us that night to ride out the storm. Everyone's adrenaline was flowing and we started making plans to cover the storm at first light. But for the most part we sat in front of two or three televisions watching, our coverage from Baton Rouge. Everyone was glued to the set and the latest storm track.



The Baton Rouge team, under the conditions, was doing an unbelievable job. I mean they were covering a storm from a different city. Technologically, it was a little crude at the LSU studios, but the school and the crews did an amazing job from the first minute they hit the air. They stayed on the air providing the latest

information, while we were hunkering down riding out the storm. But being able to stay on the air continuously was a huge benefit.

While in that Hyatt Ballroom, we saw some colleagues from a competing station, whose management had made the decision to sign off until the weather cleared. They were upset about that decision and applauded our efforts to remain on the air.

At that time we would have no idea how important it was to so many people that we stayed continuously through the storm. As it turns out, we were the only ones.

No one had really slept since Friday night and now it was Monday morning, yet nobody could go to sleep. I mean it's tough to fall asleep with that kind of storm bearing down on you, but we knew we needed to. We knew that come first light we would be in the middle of it, and who knows when we would sleep again.

Somewhere around 2:00 am, we lost power in the ballroom. The lights stayed on because of generators, but now we were starting to really feel the effects of the storm. Water was being pushed in through some of the exit doors, so everybody gathered even closer toward the middle of the room.

Around 2:30am, Carl Arredondo and I went outside to check out the storm and do a live phone interview with our team in Baton Rouge. Baton Rouge needed to know what was going on with the storm, and phone interviews were all we could do. The wind was howling and it was pouring outside, but we knew this wasn't even close to the worst of it. We had a pretty good vantage point from outside the Hyatt. They have this huge overhang where cars pull in to valet park. We could walk out looking towards City Hall and Poydras St. and see what the storm was doing, yet we had enough cover as to not be in danger from the storm.

I talked to Eric Paulsen and Sally-Ann Roberts, who were anchoring at the time, for about 15 minutes then handed my cell phone over to Carl. I think they talked to Carl for close to 45 minutes. It was great for them to have that live "what's happening now" report from a meteorologist who can truly tell them more than how windy it is and how much rain is falling. I waited for Carl for about 30

minutes, because I wanted to get my cell phone back because I wanted to get it back on charge for the following day. But as it got towards 3:00 in the morning, I went back upstairs and told him to bring it to me.

When I got back to the ballroom, everything was much quieter. Some people had drifted off, but many people were still up watching the storm. I laid down in my little space between producer, Dominic Massa, and our Assignments Editor, Greg Phillips. We were jammed in there tightly and everyone was a little punch drunk at this point. Just a couple of feet away were my News Director, Sandy Breland, our Assistant News Director, Chris Slaughter and our Special Projects Director, Mark Swinney. I'll say this for our management team, they never ask any of us to do anything they aren't willing to do themselves. If we were going to ride out the storm in the city, they were going to as well. And not far from them was our new station General Manager, Bud Brown. You talk about your baptism by fire. Bud arrived in early July from another station in Spokane, Washington, owned by the BELO Corporation. And now in less than 2 months he was sleeping on a floor of a hotel ballroom with 60 of his employees and a Category 5 Hurricane coming at the city. He must have thought, what in the world have I gotten myself into.

But it meant a lot to the rest of the employees to see the General Manager riding it out with the rest of us. I think he got a bird's eye view into the heart and soul of many of his employees at Channel Four. With Bud was his wife, our new Promotions Director, Kelly Donnell and his wife Tracy. They had just started with the station. Their first day was actually going to be Monday, August 29<sup>th</sup>, but Bud called him and said, "Hey, you want to start early?" Kelly said yes, and Bud said get to the Hyatt Hotel by 4:00pm. I'm not sure even they had even filled out all the paperwork to be employed, but here they were right in the middle of it. We were always a very close television station, but so much closer even now, and the storm really hadn't even hit yet.

I'm not sure how, but I drifted off to sleep for a couple of hours. It seemed like only minutes went by. Just before 6:00am I woke up and everyone was around

the television. Katrina had come on shore, but when she did she jogged to the east a significant bit.

New Orleans was still going to get pounded, but it didn't appear as it was going to be that worst case disaster where the storm comes up the mouth of the river, and spills all of Lake Pontchartrain over the levees into the city. There were some that expected Katrina would be that storm.

I jumped into my rain suit, and started to go outside but Sandy said go and find Mayor Nagin and Police Chief, Eddie Compass. They were both staying in the hotel somewhere.

Dennis Woltering and I went off in search of those two, and unbelievably, within a few minutes, we found both of them. We were still right in the middle of the storm so they didn't know a whole lot about the damage. They felt like their biggest obstacle was going to be communicating with all of the emergency personnel. They were heading over to City Hall for a briefing. You can't do satellite shots and microwave shots during a hurricane so we really had no way to get those interviews to Baton Rouge during the storm, but it was good to have for when we went back on the air from New Orleans.

This is when we heard the first shards of glass hit the floor from inside the Hyatt. What hotel management feared would happen was happening. Glass from all around the hotel was breaking, including glass from an atrium inside the middle of the hotel. About every two minutes or so you would hear this clash of glass hitting the floor. It was a horrific sound. The hotel security immediately started trying to herd everyone who was wandering the halls back into the main ballrooms. The hallways were dark and it wasn't too safe to be walking around with all the glass, but getting people to go back into the ballroom wasn't easy either.

It was nearing first light now, so photographer Jimmy Pennison and I decided we would go outside to start shooting the storm and any damage. We went back down under the overhang that looked out towards City Hall and Poydras Street. The wind was whipping trees, debris, signs and anything not tethered down

Poydras Street. We couldn't see a lot of damage at this point, but we knew it was still pretty early in the morning. This wasn't the real hard stuff that we should start to see in a couple of hours. Jimmy and I decided to do a "look live". That's where the reporter stands out in the middle of the storm, and tells the viewer what is happening. I know people give reporters a lot of grief for doing this; I mean, I guess it does look a little silly to stand out in a Hurricane and talk about wind and rain. But it's the only way to give the viewer a sense of the strength of a Category 4 or 5 Hurricane. And, believe me, we weren't out in the middle of it. We tried to walk along the building to get to Poydras Street to do the "look live", but when we got to the corner of the building, we could barely poke our faces out. That's how strong the wind was at that time. We ended up walking back about 20 yards where the building would provide Jimmy and his expensive camera a little protection. We shot the "look live" and started to head inside. That's when the sound of glass outside started to catch our attention.

The glass windows in the building beside the Hyatt were breaking and falling into the street where we were standing. There wasn't a lot of time to point the camera up and shoot with the falling glass, so we moved quickly to get back to the safety of the overhang. When we got back, more glass started to fall, but where we were standing just wasn't safe so we headed back inside.

We figured a good place to shoot the storm would be from the parking garage right next to the Hyatt. It would provide us some protection yet give us some new vantage points to shoot the storm. We couldn't get there from the outside, so we tried to find an exit that would lead us there.

By the time we got back inside, things had changed drastically. Glass was falling regularly in the atrium now. I mean every minute or so, you would either hear this loud explosion of glass hitting the floor, or the stream of thousands of glass shards landing. Jimmy and I walked towards the front of the New Orleans Centre on Loyola Avenue in our search for that parking garage exit. When we got to the glass doors looking out onto Loyola Avenue, we were met by about 10 New Orleans Firefighters. I talked to the Captain, and he said they had spent the

morning rescuing people from the upper floors of the Hyatt. It seems there were a great number of elderly people, some who were bedridden or confined to wheel chairs that stayed in their rooms. But now the glass in their rooms was either shattering or getting totally sucked out of the window by the wind.

There was no power for the elevators, so the firemen had to walk up flight after flight of stairs to help bring these people down. Stranded people were everywhere, some on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor, the 17<sup>th</sup> floor and others on the 27<sup>th</sup> floor. The captain said they'd been doing it all morning. About that time, another call came over the radio that more people were trapped and needed to be rescued. Without missing a beat, the fireman took off up the stairs back towards the Hyatt. Jimmy and I followed right along. They stopped to get gear in some room and Jimmy and I were there. We just figured if we looked like we belonged, no one would say anything to us. When we got back towards the middle of the hotel around the Atrium, security tried to force us back into the ballroom, but I said we were with the firefighters. The Captain didn't say anything to the contrary, so we stayed right on their back. With all this heavy gear on, they started up the stairs. It wasn't too easy to get up because every other flight someone in a wheel chair would be coming down. Other emergency services personnel were rescuing people. I felt so bad for these people. They looked exhausted. I can't imagine what they were thinking while laying in bed, waiting for the storm to pass, and their huge pane window just gets sucked out of the window; and how loud and wet it must have been inside the room after it happened. I'm sure it felt like hours before help arrived.

Some of the firefighters kept going up but we stayed with a group, rescuing people on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. They started bringing down people in their 80's and 90's. Some were in wheelchairs, but others had to be carried. It was amazing what these men and women had been doing all morning; carrying people down 20 flights of stairs, and then turning right around and doing it again. When we got to the bottom, we interviewed some tired and thankful people who said they

made the choice to stay in their rooms, but were very sorry they did. We never saw the firefighters again, but they truly did an amazing job that day.

Photographer Jimmy Pennison managed to work his way up to one of the rooms where the window had blown out. When he opened the door to get a shot of a room, the door flew open out of his hands, and a suitcase came flying right at him and glanced off the camera. He didn't stay in the room long after that; it was not safe. I don't recall what time, but I think it was somewhere around mid morning, when photographer Brian Lukas and I went back outside to get some fresh video of the storm.

We knew nothing at this point, only that the storm had knocked out a bunch of windows at the hotel we were staying in. Our team in Baton Rouge was still providing the coverage, but we were not in contact with them at this point. At least I wasn't. Within the last hour or so, water began to pile up around the CBD. Around the Superdome and our hotel the water was knee deep, but it didn't look like it was too high on other streets around us. The wind was still howling, but we felt like the worst of the Hurricane had passed off to the East of us. Brian and I felt if we could get to his van parked on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the New Orleans Center Garage, across from the Superdome, we could get out and get some of the first video from the storm. But we had to get there, and that was going to be tricky. Debris was falling off of the roofs of buildings all around us, and again, we didn't know how deep the water would be right at the garage entrance.

Brian's a world class photographer and game for anything, so we took off. We stayed real close to the side of a building as we slowly worked our way the 500 yards or so to the garage. Brian would stop along the way and shoot video, because the storm was still kicking. When we got to the corner of the garage entrance, I noticed a man walking towards us in the knee deep water. He was carrying a plastic garbage bag, and struggling in the wind and water. When he got to us, I asked him if he needed any help. He said no, he was going to the dome. He said he had been riding the storm out in his house Uptown, but that the wind took off his roof, and he decided he'd better try and get to the

Superdome. That must have been one hell of a trip walking through a hurricane to get to the Dome. The man looked beat, but he was almost there. As Brian and I were going up in the garage, he turned and got one last shot of the man as he trudged his way into the Dome. It was a surreal piece of video; the wind whipping white caps on the water, and this one man making the final few steps to his destination. With him: the only thing he had left, a garbage bag full of his belongings.

When we got to Brian's van, we found a crew from CNN who had been doing live shots from the garage all day. They said it had been a productive spot, as they could see all the damage the storm was inflicting, yet be safe enough because of the garage roof. The full force of Katrina might have passed, but windows were still breaking and debris was blowing around everywhere. This was our first chance to see the Hyatt Hotel from a distance. We could see that several windows on the side facing the Arena had been blown out, and we could see directly into offices of other buildings as windows and walls were missing. On the Western side of the garage, we could see that part of the roof had literally been ripped off the superdome. Half of that new white lining skin protecting the Superdome was missing, and you could see was the black coating underneath. That white protective lining was hanging down; flapping in the wind like the skin of a snake after it sheds.

I drove so Brian could shoot video as we went. We made it out of the garage, and driving in knee deep water, between the Superdome and the New Orleans Centre Mall, worked our way towards Poydras Street. Trees were down lying on top of cars and windows were shattered in all directions. But it wasn't until we turned right onto Poydras Street, heading towards the river, that the impact of the storm hit us. When we drove past the Hyatt hotel, we couldn't believe it. On the side facing Poydras Street, it looked like every room was missing its huge window pane. We stopped and starting shooting video of the hotel. Neither one of us said a word. The rooms were open to the elements and stuff was flying out. Also the draperies were dangling outside of the rooms. Brian and I both

said it looked like a scene you might have seen in Beirut. It was a pretty unbelievable sight, especially when you consider that's the hotel where we had just spent the last 12 hours, and now it looked like a war zone. It was one of those surreal storm moments again. We were one of the first ones out on the streets after the storm. You couldn't really drive as you normally would, because of all the glass and debris and trees littering the roadway. You just kind of snaked around in between things, driving down the wrong way on many roads, trying not to run over anything that would flatten your tire. The Central Business District had taken a hard hit. Several of the buildings sustained major damage and many had windows blown out. There were light poles down and trees down, but by the time we got towards Canal St. heading back to the station, at least we were no longer driving in water. We saw another SUV, and they signaled for us to stop. It was a crew from Miami that had been working out of our station before the storm. They said they just got back from our station and that it was alright. They even said some lights were on. We couldn't believe it, and started towards the station, but then figured we'd better get back to the hotel to tell everyone. I carefully pulled back into under the Hyatt overhang in front of the hotel, when I heard this loud pop. Despite all the efforts, I just blew one of Brian's tires. We pulled the van off to the side, and went upstairs to pass on the good news.

The upstairs Ballroom area was now pretty chaotic. People were roaming everywhere trying to make plans to leave, trying to assess the storm's damage. I think it was about 1:00 in the afternoon when we told management the station was O.K. Within 10 seconds, the Channel Four employees were huddled in a corner. It was frantic with everyone shouting out suggestions, but the key was we had to get back, fire up the station and get back on the air. One group starting getting gear and people together, while about 5 of us headed over to the station to get started. I know I've never said this before, but what a beautiful sight that old beat up building on North Rampart was on the afternoon of August 29<sup>th</sup>. She had survived well -- the piece of junk.

When we got inside the station, everyone, almost in military fashion, went to work in different directions. Engineers headed up stairs to make sure the equipment was in shape to get us back on the air. The Assistant News Director, Chris Slaughter, started working on the satellite dish for us to feed the storm material we had shot during the day to Baton Rouge. The team in Baton Rouge had now had the coverage alone for more than 12 hours, so we needed to get back on the air in New Orleans to give people what we could.

My job was to edit some of the overnight and morning stuff to feed to Baton Rouge. Normally, as a reporter, we don't edit much, but in this case everybody just did what we had to do to get the story on the air as fast as possible. On my way to the edit booth I made two of the fastest cell phone calls in my life. I called my wife Betty-Ann in Jackson, where the storm was now hitting them pretty hard, to let her know we'd made it through alright, and that I'd call her when I got a chance. I then called my parents in Manassas, Virginia to do the same. I don't give my parents too many of the details at a time like this because I don't want them to worry. It was literally, I'm alive and O.K, I'll talk to you soon...Bye. I didn't realize at the time that those would be the last two cell phone calls I would make for days. In looking back, I can't believe they worked then.

I edited tape for about an hour as we figured out how to get on the air. Power was on in the newsroom, but it was out in other parts of the building including our studios. We would need a place to broadcast from when we took the coverage back from Baton Rouge. By this point most of our team had made it back from the Hyatt, and everybody was going in different directions. Karen Swensen and I were getting ready to anchor again, we just didn't know from where. The reporters and photogs hit the streets to see what part of the city had the most damage.

Our management team worked out a system with cameras and microphones to start broadcasting from Chris Slaughters office. It's about an 8 foot by 9 foot room with glass on three sides. It would be cramped, not too aesthetic, but we didn't care. We needed to show people what Katrina had done. The difficult part

here was that we wouldn't be able to see the video that we were supposed to be talking about. That was going to make it very difficult to really give people a sense of how bad it was.

We had a few technical problems but at around 3:00pm took back the coverage from Baton Rouge. They had been on the air since 11:00pm the night before. What an amazing job they had done covering a storm 60 miles away. Karen and I did the best we could to fill people in on what we knew, but it was a rather trying situation. There were some audio and video issues but at least we were on the air. We got word that we could be back in our downstairs studio within an hour and so to better prepare for that we again threw it back to Baton Rouge. I'm sure they loved hearing that after 16 hours of continuous coverage. But their taking it back for 30 or 40 minutes allowed us to set up the studio and get ready to take it back full time. At 4:00pm Karen and I were in the downstairs morning show news set and back on the air. At this point we really didn't know how bad it was. We knew areas to the East had been hit hard, but we really didn't know how hard. It was like anchoring in a vacuum. We had no communications. All the phone lines in our office didn't work, and cell phones didn't either. We were trying to find out what happened on the Northshore, but we couldn't reach Bureau Chief, Mike Ross. We were a little concerned at the time that everybody over there was alright. We couldn't contact anyone from St. Bernard Parish or Plaquemines Parish, but we felt those areas had taken the brunt of the storm.

The reporters came back with unbelievable video from all around the city. Sports producer, Brent Ledet, went around the uptown area and came back with video of collapsed brick buildings and tons of wind damage.

Traffic reporter, Jill Hezeau, and photographer, Jim Pennison, went out to the east of the station around the Gentilly area, and found people being rescued on boats. They went along for one of the rescues and found a family with very young children looking for help. The rescue workers handed Jill, who was sitting in the boat, this young baby who was crying uncontrollably. Jill did a great job by just putting her arms around her and telling her everything was going to be

alright. When Jill and Jimmy got back, we put them both on the set as they told us about the amazing job the rescuers were doing, and the unbelievable mass of people that still needed help. I told Jill on camera that she was going to make a great mom someday. She would later tell me that was the nicest compliment anyone has ever given her.

Just from the radar, we knew the Slidell area along the lake had taken a real hard hit.

That's where Karen lived, and also my boss, Sandy and some other members of the Channel Four family. They were working that day not knowing if they would have a house to come back too. That was awfully tough on both of them, because if you looked at the storms path and the amount of surge that was supposed to hit Slidell, it wasn't going to be good. I can remember only one time, and it was brief, where Karen really had a hard time. It was an incredibly emotional time for everyone. She hadn't seen her husband or her daughter in days, and now we thought her house might be gone. She really did an amazing job staying on the air and composed that evening.

All the video that came in was bad, but it didn't appear that bad, something we couldn't overcome. We just didn't know that much in the early hours. We didn't know what was happening in St. Bernard and New Orleans East. We assumed because we hadn't heard from anyone in those areas that it was not good, but we truly didn't know the extent of the damage or the number of people who were sitting on their roofs at that time, waiting to be rescued. It was dark now, and most of our crews were back at the station. During the evening we got our first aerial video from a helicopter. So many parts of the city had water. The chopper flew over the Fairgrounds and Gentilly, which were areas that were totally inundated.

Our misguided sense that we had escaped the big hit ended around 8:00 that night. Mayor Ray Nagin, again stopped by the studio to give us an update. I'll never forget the awful look on his face. That's the most down I've ever seen the man. He talked in a low, hushed tone. I'll always remember what he said when

we asked him about damage to the East and Slidell. He said the Interstate 10 Twin Spans Bridge was gone. When he said the word “gone”, Dennis and I just sat there we didn’t say anything, we couldn’t. We both asked him several times because we just couldn’t believe it. He said not damaged --“gone”. Karen’s house is less than a couple of miles from that bridge. It was again, one of “those” moments during the storm where the shocking reality set in. The Mayor said there was flooding in New Orleans East and in St. Bernard as well. He talked about levee breaches in the city, but couldn’t say how bad it was. Little did we know, but water was pouring into the city at that moment. He said communications throughout the city were awful. It was a very sobering 30 minute interview.

Dennis Woltering and I anchored until 11:00pm, when the decision was made to toss to CNN’s coverage. They had been doing around-the-clock coverage of the storm as well. We didn’t have the resources at that point to stay on all night. It was dark, so we couldn’t shoot any video, and all the phone lines were down, so we couldn’t find out how other parts of the city fared. No one had slept, really since Friday night, so CNN would take our coverage until the Baton Rouge team would take over around 5:00 in the morning.



When Dennis and I finished, we walked back to the newsroom to find most people had found a place to lie down for a few hours. It was quiet and somber. I hadn’t eaten since that

piece of pizza on Sunday morning, and I found one of those microwave cans of chunky soup on the news desk. I can't tell you how good that was.

As I sat at my desk, I realized during the rush to get back to the station, I left the hotel without getting my stuff. I didn't have any clothes to wear for the foreseeable future.

Thankfully, producer Rhonda Gryzch, and reporter Thanh Truong, said they were going over to the hotel to try and retrieve people's stuff. I begged them to grab my duffel bag in room 1051 on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. They said fine and went off in the dead of night for the Hyatt.

There were only a handful of us still awake, as it was now almost midnight. Assignment Editor, Greg Phillips and reporter, Josh McElveen called me into one of the offices. I didn't know what was going on. Somewhere they had found a bottle of Southern Comfort. We each poured a shot for a toast to New Orleans and my birthday. The shot went down like glass, but it was cool for those guys to finish off one of the worst days of our lives that way. I'll never forget it.

When I got back to my desk Karen was talking to Sandy and Dave. Dave McNamara is one of our best reporters, and Sandy's husband. They were having this eerie conversation about their houses. The talk at the time wasn't about damage their houses had sustained, but that they were wiped from their foundation. I felt so bad for them. I live to the west of the city, and I didn't know how my house fared, but they knew they were hit by the huge storm surge. Having to work like they did, while not knowing the future of their homes, must have been unbelievably draining.

We don't really have any place to sleep at Channel Four so everyone grabbed a blanket and a pillow and found some nook to lie down in. There were people in edit suites, in offices on floors, everywhere. I figured the best place for me to sleep was right there in my chair. I put my feet on my desk, grabbed a couple of huge bath towels and tried to go to sleep. I didn't bring any blankets or pillows because we had rooms at the Hyatt. I didn't envision sleeping at my desk, certainly not the night after the storm. That was horribly uncomfortable and

around 2:00 in the morning, I figured I would just sleep on the floor in front of my desk--in the same spot where I had found a mouse a couple of months earlier. It's the same spot where over the last 5 ½ years, I had dropped enough crumbs to feed the mouse and his family. But at that point, I really didn't care. Finally, Monday, August 29<sup>th</sup> was over. Around 3:00am I drifted off to sleep thinking no day could be worse than this. I was wrong.

### Tuesday August 30<sup>th</sup>

They are the most jarring words I've ever heard, not to mention they were the first words I heard around 6:45 Tuesday morning. Lying in front of my desk about 10 feet away from the assignment desk, I was awakened by these words from our News Director Sandy Breland, "Everyone get up... now... the water is rising". I heard her say it, but felt it had to be a dream. The rain ended Monday afternoon and we had no reports of any rising water. But Sandy again told everyone to get up and get gear on, the water is coming. Dave McNamara had been out at first light to get to City Hall to find out the latest, but couldn't get to City Hall because of the high water. This was water that wasn't there the day before. When we left the Hyatt to come back to the station, we rode on the same streets that were now under a couple of feet of water. All we knew at that point was that the levees had broken somewhere, and parts of the city were filling up. People started to gather up their belongings for a quick meeting in the newsroom. The look on people's faces when they heard the news was crushing. We didn't know what was happening. Which levees? How high was the water going to get? Are we safe here at the station? The phone system was of little help at that point, so with few other options, Sandy ordered everyone to our roof. At 7:00 in the morning the day after the storm, we were now bugging out to our roof. I've had to work enough Fourth of Julys and New Year's Eves that I actually knew how to get to the roof. We would go up there at night on those holidays to watch the city's fireworks display. It's a little tricky though, as you

have to go through the studio, and then into the sales department, and up this little hatch cut in the ceiling. It's a little tricky with electricity, but now 50 of us were attempting to do it in pitch black. Channel Four has very few windows, and getting everyone to the roof was not going to be easy. Everyone scrambled at their desk to grab anything that we thought might be under water in a few hours. I had never really prepared anything at my desk, and now I was throwing everything I could in one box to take to the roof. I had pictures of my wife and kids, some tapes, any important papers, and that was about it. A few of us had flashlights, so we stood in various locations helping to lead people through the building to get to the roof opening. About half of us got on the roof, and the other half were getting there, when Sandy and Chris told everyone to come back down to the newsroom. They weren't sure if cornering ourselves in on the roof was the best idea. If we were all up there, we couldn't do anything but wait to be rescued. We couldn't broadcast. We couldn't tell the story, and give people the information they needed. The decision was made that we would head over to our transmitter building on the Westbank. It was built to withstand not only hurricane force winds, but it was built 15 feet off the ground, and it would be safe from any flooding. We were bugging out to the transmitter.

We didn't know how long it would take for the water to get to us, so we all moved quickly. As we had been doing since Saturday, we went everywhere in a caravan. We weren't leaving anybody behind after all we'd been through. Channel Four has a huge gas tank in the parking lot, so everyone filled up their cars before we left, as we had no idea when our next chance to get gasoline would be. If you've never seen the Channel Four parking lot, imagine the smallest parcel of land anywhere. It's tucked away behind our building in the French quarter and now we were trying to gas up 25 cars and evacuate before the water got there. It was part chaotic and part comedic. About 6 people directing traffic, cars trying to back up to get to the gas nozzle, other cars pulling out onto the street, but staying in the line of the caravan. People loading anything they could get from the station into the back of cars. Somewhere along

the way someone, thank God, had the bright idea to get into the station clothes room and grabbed boxes Channel Four t-shirts, golf shirts, and hats. In retrospect, I don't know what we would have done had someone not done that. We were all pretty much out of our own clothes already, and as it turned out we lived off of those clothes for the next month. By around 10:30 Tuesday morning, with the water creeping towards the station, the caravan headed off to the transmitter.

The plan was to go through the French Quarter and meet up on the Crescent City Connection before going across. I know it sounds funny to meet up on the bridge, but that's what we did. On the way through the Quarter, we saw lots of people just hanging around in the streets, like they didn't have a care in the world. We knew what was happening, and WWL radio was also reporting the levee breaks and water filling the city, but we didn't get the impression that anyone on the streets knew what was coming. So we did our best to tell as many people as we could. We rolled down the windows and literally yelled at people, "The levees have broken, water is filling up the city, tune into the news and head for higher ground". I don't know if they thought we were crazy, but it's the only thing we thought we could do. Some of the streets were impassable because of the debris, so we just drove down one way streets to get up on the Crescent City Connection. Little did we know that kind of driving anarchy would rule for the next month. We finally made it up onto the bridge, and everyone stopped as told right before going across. It was one of the most surreal moments of the storm. Here we are, 25 or 30 cars just parked in the road on the Crescent City Connection. There were no other cars, no traffic going in either direction, just us and some police and firefighters. We all got out of our cars and just walked around on this huge 4 or 5 lane highway. It was like an episode of the Twilight Zone, there was no one else around. We couldn't see any cars or any people; it was eerily quiet everywhere. It was like looking at a picture of New Orleans, instead of the real city. I'll never forget that empty feeling, sitting on that bridge wondering what was happening to the city we all loved.

When we got everyone together, we headed off to our new home. The building of the transmitter was a big deal for Channel Four, and our parent company BELO Corp, bringing us some new equipment and an updated Hurricane proof building. It had just been built in the last few years, and they even had employee tours to it during construction, but many of us never went. I wish I had, because I had a hard time finding it, and today I couldn't even give you decent directions to get there. I do remember when the caravan got near the entrance, we passed a little convenience store that was being looted by several people. We didn't feel threatened or scared, but it was our first glimpse of what was to come. Things were different now.

I remember the people in the neighborhood looking at all the cars and wondering what the hell is this. They had never seen this many cars and trucks going to this brick structure that sat in a big field all by itself. When we got inside the transmitter, my News Director, Sandy Breland looked at me and said, "We need provisions, we need food and water". Sandy knew if we could find Jefferson Parish Sheriff, Harry Lee, we could work out a way to get what we needed. So Sandy, I, and a few others headed off to find Sheriff Lee. He wasn't at the main Westbank office, but they said we might look at the Sam's on Airline Drive in Metairie. They said that was going to be a staging operation for FEMA and the rescue teams. There were no communications, so they couldn't tell us if he was there, only that he was *supposed* to be there. We headed off across the Huey P. Long Bridge, and into the Elmwood area. We were just a few miles from my house, and I was dying to find out how I fared, but that would have to wait. It's now probably close to noon on Tuesday, the day after the storm. While there was water all over Jefferson Parish, it was dry around the Clearview Parkway and Earhart Expressway area. The same area that's usually under two feet of water during an afternoon thunderstorm was now bone dry. When we got to the Sam's parking lot, we for the first time, saw some of the Federal relief the Mayor had been talking about. There were helicopters and big 18 wheel trucks. There were rescue crews from all around the nation, and there were boats. The little

flatbed boats were everywhere. The whole parking lot was kind of controlled chaos. Everyone was running in different directions. It looked kind of crazy, but at least we were finally seeing some action. We got there just in time, because right after we pulled up, Sheriff Lee was getting in his car to go back to where the boats were putting in for the rescue operations. Sandy explained our dilemma, and Sheriff Lee quickly took care of us. He told his deputies who were guarding and utilizing the Sam's, to allow us inside to get some food and water. We grabbed some carts and rushed inside. We didn't have much time, so it was a mad dash for the important stuff we would need to keep 50 alive for God knows how long. We got bread, peanut butter, sandwich meat, water, Gatorade and other items. We filled two baskets in about 10 minutes. There was no one in the store but us so it didn't take much time. We got to the door and a couple of JP Deputies checked us out. We wrote down everything we took, so the station could pay for it later. This was no gift, and we just didn't want to take it. I know Sandy felt a lot better when we secured the provision for her staff. It's tough when you're responsible for 50 people, and there's no food or water, and you've been working for 4 days around the clock.

When we got back to the transmitter, everyone was in full throttle mode. The reporters and photographers had all left to go back to the city, and back to where people were being rescued. Most of everyone else starting doing whatever it was going to take to resume our broadcast from this concrete building. Two photographers set up in a little side office that would be our studio. Three chairs against a white wall backdrop. It wasn't going to be pretty, but we were going to be back on the air soon, giving people the latest as to what was happening around New Orleans. Our Baton Rouge team had the morning and early afternoon coverage, but by around 2:00pm we were now broadcasting from our transmitter. It might sound easy, but it happened only because of the amazing work from many people. Our director, Gary Rigsby, would have a couple of cameras to choose from but, it was very basic television. Whenever he would roll a tape of the destruction or the rescues, we would go to black and then the

video would pop up. It isn't the type of stuff you would normally see in a broadcast, but this wasn't a normal broadcast. How tough was it? We really didn't even have any communication with our Baton Rouge team. When it was time for us to take over from them, we couldn't tell them we were ready by telephone or anything.



Karen Swensen and Dennis Woltering were set to anchor the first shift, so Karen wrote out on a big piece of paper, "WERE READY". Then they could see us, and when they saw that we again resumed our coverage from New Orleans. It was archaic but it worked somehow.

The stories that were coming in were simply unbelievable. The city was underwater and it didn't appear like it was going to stop anytime soon.

When Karen and Dennis were anchoring I sat down at one of the computer terminals where we were able to get a slither of news. As I did so I watched our coverage.

Eric Paulsen was providing a good chunk of it from a helicopter tour. It was amazing stuff. And the video was overwhelming. Water was everywhere. I remember him flying over the Metairie area and all you could see was water. You couldn't tell how deep but it covered everything as far as the eye could see. I then thought our house in River Ridge could have taken on water. The house flooded back during the May 1995 storm before we bought it, in fact we purchased the house and land after the flood and tore it down to rebuild. We built a little higher but it was looking more and more like we were going to have

water in our house. That helicopter ride was one of my lowest moments because it seemed like it was going to be too much to overcome. The area of flooding was just too large. It was hard to take.

The stories coming from the Superdome were getting worse. The situation there was unlivable, and the people stuck there were feeling desperate. The whole building was surrounded by water. I can't imagine what it must have been like to be trapped in there. There wasn't much we could do from a story standpoint because we really couldn't get close to the building. We were able to see CNN from the transmitter, and the aerial video we were watching told of a situation out of control.

The looting in the city was now out of control. When reporters would return from the city, they would tell these unbelievable stories of people running the street. Some were looting simply to steal, while others were just trying to get food and water to stay alive. But our reporters and the photographers said the situation was not safe. They had no police protection, and people on the street could see we had a car, and felt we could take them to safety. But some people just wanted help. They didn't know what to do. When was the water going to do down? How were they going to get out of town or find food and water? There was nothing anyone could do. We certainly didn't have the answers for them, as we didn't know the answers to those questions ourselves. You didn't think about the big picture. You were doing what you had to do to get through the next hour.

By the early evening, some of the local officials were starting to find us. While on the air, we would give our location and beg officials to come to us with information. We figured we could put them on the air, and they could best describe the situation in their area. To be honest, we really didn't know who we were talking to. The city was virtually empty, so we didn't expect there were a great number of people out there watching on television with an antenna. We were also broadcasting over the internet but we really weren't sure who knew that and who was watching.

I remember we still had not heard anything from Plaquemines Parish. I mean nothing. We knew it was bad because of the path of the storm but we didn't know any of the specifics. We couldn't reach anyone down there, and attempts to drive there were stopped pretty early in the trip by water. It was a helpless feeling.

### WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 31st

I am one of the last people up at just before 7:00am. It was truly the soundest sleep I can ever remember. I woke up in the same position, the same clothes, the same everything, as I lay down. You have to know me to realize how uncharacteristic that is. I was totally exhausted. But downstairs Sandy was having a morning meeting to determine the stories for the day. But again, we know so little about what's going on outside of our little world, reporters weren't sent on stories as much as they were sent to areas of the city to check on flooding and rescues. It was now Wednesday morning, and my last shower was Sunday morning. I had been through the storm and anchored for 3 days in basically the same clothes. We all needed a shower, but there was no running water in the transmitter, so you couldn't even go to the bathroom. Anchor, Josh McElveen knew some officers at the 4th District NOPD Police Station, so five of us loaded into a van and headed over to see if we could bum a shower.

When we got the station, the scene was unreal. Officers were everywhere, sitting down head in hands, smoking cigarettes, unshowered, unshaven. They were beat to a pulp. They had been working around the clock since the storm, and you could see the despair in their eyes. I felt enormously guilty about even asking for a shower, but they were very cool about it and showed us the bathroom. There had to be an inch of water already on the floor, and with only generator lights in some parts of the building, the bathroom was virtually dark. The shower stall was unique in that it had two heads about 5 feet apart that

pointed at each other. That would have been nice if you were going in by yourself, but this was two men at a time.

We didn't have towels or soap, but inside the stall was some dawn dishwashing liquid. We used it and were damn happy it was there. When it was my turn, I went in with our assignment editor, Greg Phillips, a great guy, and we got along well. Well now, we were going to be naked about a foot apart from each other, taking a cold shower in a dark stall. We didn't talk much during the shower, but I know what each of us were thinking, forget dropping the soap, leaning over was all that it would take. Let's just say it wasn't the slowest shower either of us had taken, but as rough as it was, it felt great to wash the remnants of Katrina off of me.

Fortunately, when we bugged out of the station on Tuesday, someone thought to go into the Channel 4 store and grab every last t-shirt and golf shirt the station owned. So at least after the shower, we were able to put on a clean shirt. We all grabbed enough shirts to get us through the next couple of days. As it turned out, we would wear those shirts for the next month. We thanked everyone we could find on our way out, and worked our way back to the transmitter to start the day.

They were still assigning stories when we returned, and I offered to check out the Metairie, Kenner, and River Ridge area. Sandy said OK, and photographer, Garland Gillen and I took off for the Eastbank. We were going to see if the water had gone down from the day before when virtually all of Metairie and Kenner appeared to be underwater. We also had a secondary mission. To check out our homes and homes of our families. We both lived in River Ridge so on our way to Metairie, we drove by our homes to check out the damage. I knew my house had a chance for water, as the area flooded in the May 1995 flood, but my main concern was the huge oak trees in my yard and in our neighborhood. I could hardly breathe when we started down my street. You had to drive almost on the sidewalks because of trees in the middle of the road. When we pulled into my driveway, I could hardly look. We built the house in 1996 and I envisioned

the worst of damage. The front of the house looked fine and the site of my untouched house in the backyard was a relief of epic proportions. The huge oak tree had been torn apart with huge limbs everywhere, but nothing fell on the house, and the water line that I could see in my front yard stopped about 20 feet from my house. From what I could tell, I was a lucky one and I couldn't wait to tell Betty-Ann the good news, but of course there was no way to reach her. We stopped at her sister's house, and Garland's parents' house in River Ridge, and it looked like, except for trees downed and roof damage, everything appeared alright.

We would shoot video of the damage to the area as we made our way to Metairie. The streets were desolate. You had to be careful where you drove because power lines were down and debris littered the road. One of our biggest fears at the time was getting a flat tire, as you could put a spare on, but there wasn't anyplace to get the other one fixed. In Metairie we checked on Betty-Ann's other sister's house and then her Mom's. There were two huge trees uprooted across the street from her, but her house looked like it didn't have any exterior damage. I walked around back and found a back door open and walked inside, and knew immediately there was a problem. I could smell it. Her house had water. It was gone now, but the mud and the dirt left a residue on her new tile floors. I could see the water line a foot or so up her walls. She has flooded before, and it's never easy. Now I wasn't looking forward to calling Jackson and the family to tell them the news.

It took you forever to get anywhere that day, because every time you took a road, you knew it was blocked by some tree in the middle of the road. So we would have to back up and find an alternate route. It was a sunny, hot day and the water that we had seen from the helicopter over Metairie and Kenner was now gone.

In Kenner we got close to Josh McElveen's house, so we stopped to see if he had any damage. On Monday night the first reports he had were that his area had 8 feet or more of water. He was totally bummed out, but when we got there

it looked like the water stopped right in front of his house. I went around back and he too had left a door open. Second house I'd broken into that day. His house looked fine, the baby's room carpet was dry and it didn't smell. I couldn't wait to tell him.

We went a few more places around Metairie, checked out the levee on Lake Pontchartrain, and then decided we had enough video to start heading back.

We headed east on I-10 towards Causeway, where we're going to work our way back to the Huey P. Long bridge and the Westbank.

As we got closer to the Interstate 10 and Causeway interchange, we could see a flurry of activity. There were helicopters, ambulances; people were everywhere. There must have been 2 or 3 thousand people. It was a scene of controlled chaos. We didn't know what it was, but pulled over grabbed the camera and headed over. We found out that these were the people being rescued off of roof tops in St. Bernard Parish and New Orleans East. There must have been 30 buses and an equal amount of ambulances just lined up on the interstate, waiting to carry people out. And the sky was full of helicopters waiting to drop off people. The helicopters would grab as many people as they could, and then head to the Causeway-Interstate 10 interchange. The grassy areas inside the loops were used as the landing spots. It was so chaotic but it also had an amazing amount of coordination and rhythm as well. It wasn't planned, it was just happening. There were so many people... just doing it. Doing whatever it took to get people to safety. The helicopters would touch down for 30 seconds, drop off 6 or 7 people, and take off again to get more people. There were always a couple of helicopters landing or taking off around the same time. It was amazing. I don't know how long it had been going on, but Wednesday around noon, we were the only television station there. I couldn't believe how many little kids or babies were getting off the helicopters. Kids were getting off by themselves, and mothers were carrying babies less than a few months old.

The actual roadway of the interstate had been turned into a bus depot, Hospital, and food line. After getting out of the helicopters, people were taken to a triage

area underneath Causeway Blvd in the shade. Once doctors had checked them out, they would go over to the water and sandwich wagons to get some food. For some it was their first food since Sunday or Monday. And then they would line up to get on a bus heading west. All they knew is that they were heading west. They didn't know where the busses were going, and the people I talked to didn't care, as they were at least off of their roofs. They were a beaten group of people. They were tired, dehydrated, bewildered at the recent day's events and basically in shock. They walked around with a glazed look in their eyes, all wondering what I do next.

We talked to one family of 7 or 8 with little kids who lived in New Orleans East. When the water started to rise Monday morning, they escaped their house and made it onto their roof. And that is where they stayed until they were rescued Wednesday afternoon. They survived on nothing but a little bit of water and M and M's. And there were two little kids with them.

The Mom talked of the brutal hours sitting on that hot roof in the blazing sun, watching and listening to helicopters fly over. But it was not their turn to be rescued. She said the days were horrible but the nights were worse. Think of how dark your house gets or your neighborhood when the power goes out. Well now the power was out to the whole city. When it got dark at night it was pitch black. You couldn't see 10 feet in front of you. The Mother said those were the tough times. All you could do was sit there and listen to the horrific sounds of the night. People screaming for help. People dying. Animals swimming nearby looking for safety. She said those were her worst hours.

We talked to several families with similar horror stories before deciding to head back to get this material on the air. It was the first sound that we had from people being rescued from rooftops by helicopter. As we were leaving, I noticed a man standing amongst several other people urinating. He was just standing there peeing. He paid no mind to anyone else, and they paid no attention to him. It was yet another surreal moment of the storm. There were no bathrooms

anywhere and he had to go. What were you going to do? People just went about their business of trying to figure out their next move. God, I'll never forget that.

The scene at Causeway and I-10 also highlights the amazing communication disconnect that occurred during the days after the storm. Here's this massive rescue effort involving thousands of people on an interstate in Metairie and no one knew about it. We just stumbled onto it. There were no press releases, no phone calls, e-mails, nothing. We just happened to be in the area. And this was 3 days after the storm. We were truly in a vacuum there for awhile. It didn't affect how we reported the storm, although it made it much more difficult.

When we got back to the transmitter, we told Sandy what we had, and she said get it on the air as soon as possible. But before going to the live truck, I found Josh McElveen to tell him his house was dry. He couldn't believe it. We were so happy we were hugging and doing high fives. A couple of photographers from Dallas were leaning against the wall, probably wondering what in the hell was going on. But since Sunday night, Josh had figured his house was under 8 feet of water, and now he finds out its dry. It was a big moment.

Garland and I edited and wrote the story in one of our live trucks sitting outside the transmitter. What some people might not remember in those days following the storm was how terribly hot it was. It was 95 degrees with unbearable humidity. We got the story ready, and I went up on the set to talk about what we had seen. I say set, but it was hardly a news set. We had two cameras and three chairs set up in a small white office of the transmitter. It was small, cramped quarters but everyone did such a fantastic job just to get us on the air. There were no commercial breaks, when we were on...we were on. Sometimes for 8 or 9 hours straight. When I went on set, I just walked in and put a microphone on, and Dennis and Karen starting asking me questions- and all of this was on the air. All of the pomp and circumstance that you normally watched in a nice, neat newscast were out the window. It was raw, rudimentary television. The viewers got what we saw with very little editing. Just here it is. Here's what

we saw. Here's how people are surviving. It was pure informational television. In a way, it's kind of the way television news should be.

I stayed on the set and continued anchoring into the evening. It was during the day Wednesday that we really started to see the massive problems with the looting going on in the city. We had seen it before on Monday and Tuesday, but on Wednesday things started to take a turn for the worse. People were getting desperate for food, water and a way out of the city. And here we were driving around in air conditioned cars trying to document the story. We were easy targets. Some of our crews in the city say it was getting dangerous to be out on the streets. Police were doing what they could, but there just weren't enough of them, not to mention there was no way to contact them should something happen.

We had news teams come back with unbelievable video of looting and people running the streets. In spots it was total lawlessness in the city. It didn't seem like there was anything anyone could do.

Sandy called a meeting of everyone not on the air to talk about our future. The city was underwater, and it was going to stay that way for sometime. We had to decide if staying in the transmitter long-term was going to be the best way to go. We were on the air and it was working, but how long can we survive with no bathrooms, no shower and cold sandwiches? Not to mention, we were sitting ducks when it came to possible looting. People now knew where we were, and that we had food and water. Our company had provided 2 armed officers to stay with us and protect us, but it didn't seem like we had enough security to make a go of it at the transmitter. The decision was made for all of us to head to Baton Rouge, and then drive into New Orleans each day to cover the story. We would be broadcasting out of the LSU campus until Thursday morning, when we would start broadcasting out of the Louisiana Public Broadcasting station. I didn't know where it was, but it would become our home for the foreseeable future. Most of us didn't want to leave as we wanted to be where the story was, but it was probably for the best to get everyone out to a safer area. How bad was it at that

point? Well we had two Jefferson Parish Deputies that were with us at the transmitter to protect us, and when the decision came down to leave for Baton Rouge, one of the deputies begged us to take him with us. He wasn't assigned to us for the trip, but he didn't want to stay around, and was willing to just walk away from the job rather than stay. He quit that night and came with us to Baton Rouge.

The decision was made for us to toss to the Baton Rouge team around 7:00 at night and they would continue the coverage to allow us time to drive to Baton Rouge. We all started to gather what personal items we had to make yet another move. We had only been at the transmitter for a day and a half, but it felt like a year. I threw my duffle bag in the back of reporter Dave McNamara's truck. But I ended up riding to Baton Rouge with Sandy and Karen Swensen. Poor Karen had to find yet another place to house her dog Elvis who had been with us since the storm. He had been in the Hyatt, the station, the transmitter, and now he was heading to Baton Rouge. Our company, BELO, said they were getting everyone apartments or hotels to live while we covered the story.

Before we left there, we all gathered in front of the transmitter for a group picture. We were a haggard bunch, baseball caps, dirty clothes, hot and tired. But we were close bunch of people. We had been through a lot, and we leaned on each other pretty heavily in the days following the storm. Our personal lives had pretty much been put on hold while we worked, but as Sandy said, working kept our minds off of our personal lives.

Around 7:30pm, the Channel 4 caravan was off again, heading west towards Baton Rouge. The first half of the trip was a very eerie drive, as everything was just so dark without electricity. We were leaving behind our city in shambles and it didn't look like it was going to get better anytime soon. When we got out of town a little bit, we started to see lights, blue lights. They were state police cars, literally 50 at a time driving east on Interstate 10 coming into town. We were so pumped because it was like the Calvary arriving to gain control of the city. It really lifted our spirits. We'd drive another 10 miles and then another string of

blue lights with more state troopers. I don't know where they were all coming from, but there couldn't have been many left in the rest of the state. For some reason Carl Arredondo had a fish with him during the evacuation, and for some reason I ended up with it in the backseat of Sandy's car, which was fairly new. I love Sandy, but she is not the best driver in the world. A little too much on her mind to truly stay focused on the road. Not to mention she's a right foot gas and a left foot brake person. Not a great combination if you're riding in the backseat with a fishbowl full of water. Every time she would stop, the water would go flying, mostly on her new carpet. I guess all the hours of work and no sleep just got to us, because we were giddy about this fish and Sandy's driving. It was the first time we had laughed in days, and it was therapeutic. I'll never forget that ride to Baton Rouge that night.

When we got to LSU, we found the Communications building where the Baton Rouge team had been working under difficult conditions since the Saturday before the storm. When we started to see our colleagues, it was as if we hadn't seen them in a year. We screamed and hugged and talked about what everyone had been through. They too, had been working around the clock, living in unfurnished dorm rooms on campus, covering a story that was 60 miles to the Southeast. That's not an easy thing to do. For the New Orleans team, the story was here, we looked out the window and there it was. But covering that story from Baton Rouge had its own set of problems. You needed to talk to people on the phone to get information, and that was the one thing that was nearly impossible to do in the days after the storm. And they too, were having to cover a story, not knowing if their own houses was still standing. For some people who lived in Lakeview, St. Bernard Parish and New Orleans East, they knew most likely they'd lost everything.

Our company, BELO, brought us into a room and told us about the plan for the future. We were all going to be roommates at different places throughout Baton Rouge. There were no hotel rooms, but BELO had arranged and started renting as many apartments as they could get their hands on. That was no easy task, as

Baton Rouge was full of New Orleanians who knew by now they weren't going home anytime in the near future. There were about 8 of us guys who were going to be in an apartment complex off of the interstate. That's all we knew. We didn't know for how long, or if we'd get clothes somehow, but at least we'd have a roof over our head. BELO said they would take care of our immediate needs.

We were instructed to go downstairs to an SUV parked out back. There, a company representative gave each of us a blanket and a roll of toilet paper. It doesn't sound like much, but we were happy to have anything. It was just another sign of how difficult things were at that time. Here we all were, broadcast professionals, walking around with no money, no place to live, very few clothes and no idea what tomorrow is going to bring. Yet we had this brown and orange blanket and a roll of toilet paper, and we were all content to see what tomorrow would bring.

Our General Manager, Bud Brown, had arranged for everyone to meet at this restaurant/bar called Chimes, near the LSU campus. We were all pretty tired, but we went anyway, as it was a way to reconnect with the people who handled our Baton Rouge coverage. It was a weird night, but one I'll never forget. It was like this big reunion. Everyone was so happy to see one another, yet so drained from the week's events. We hugged and high fived. I don't think a cold beer has ever tasted so good. It was really great to see everyone.

Our internet people were there, and they gave us news we truly couldn't believe. They said that people had been watching our coverage on the internet. On one of the days after the storm, 16 million people had looked on our internet site-- *in one day*. We were floored. We truly didn't know who we were talking to during that time, but as it turns out everyone who evacuated the storm was dying for information, and our website was the one of the few places to get it. People could watch our live continuous coverage on the internet as if it were on TV. We would later find out from a great number of people how important our coverage was to them. They might be sitting in a hotel room in Memphis or Houston and

they wanted to know what was happening in their neighborhoods, and pretty much all the networks were covering was the situation at the Superdome or the Convention Center. We were their lifeline to *New Orleans*.

It felt like it we had been separated for months and not just a few days. It was such an important event for us to let off some steam. When someone new would come in, we would shout their name like they were being introduced at a basketball game. Then everyone would surround the person to shake hands or hug. I noticed people sitting at nearby tables looking at us like we were crazy. Bud had opened up the bar tab, and at the bar I told him no matter how long he stays in television, he'll never have a station as close as we were at that point. Nobody wanted the night to end, but we all knew Thursday morning would bring us new challenges, and we would wake up with the sad reality of Katrina again.



There were about 8 of us staying in an apartment off of Interstate 12 in Baton Rouge. I had no idea where it was, or even how to get there. Thankfully, someone else was driving. It was fairly new, but these were all unfurnished places. So we get back to this apartment, and there are 6 of us in one room. No beds or anything, just our orange and brown blanket. We were bushed, and despite a few more laughs, we fell asleep pretty quickly.

I woke up that morning at 7:00 o'clock on the concrete floor of our transmitter, and fell asleep that night 19 hours later on a floor in Baton Rouge. This was how life was going to be for awhile.

**Thursday, September 1st**

It was not a good night's sleep, but no one expected it to be with 6 guys in one room, tucked away in any little corner we could find. When I woke up people were starting to take showers, and it was then I realized I didn't have my duffle bag with what little amount of clothes I had. I remembered putting the bag in Dave McNamara's truck, but I forgot to get it out when we were at Chimes Restaurant. The apartment complex we were in was huge, and I didn't even know if Dave and Sandy were staying there. I tried to reach him on his cell phone but couldn't, so I was going to have to put on the old smelly clothes from the day before. That was an appalling thought, but I had no choice. I didn't have a towel or any toiletries for a shower, so I bummed some shampoo and headed off to the shower with my trusty orange and brown blanket that I would use as my towel, and then I put those same clothes back on. I couldn't wait to find Dave McNamara.

We were all told to report to the Louisiana Public Broadcasting Television station as soon as we woke up, and we got there around 7:30 in the morning. This was going to be our new home for the future. When we walked in, Producer Lamar Bourgeois gave us a quick tour of the station, showing us where we would edit stories and anchor. There was also this huge room that had been turned into communications central. There were television monitors and a big white grease board to list all of the news teams and their whereabouts.

Our company, BELO, had started to send in people from across the country to help us. Producers, management, reporters, and photographers all flew in to help us cover the story, though at this point it was a pretty huge story nationwide, so they were covering it for themselves too. We would not have made it without the army of people and supplies that came in during those days after the storm. But trying to coordinate everyone was a nightmare I'm sure, for Sandy, Chris and Mark.

After the tour, when I walked into the communications room, Sandy was there and she said to go on the air. I said go on the air, what are you talking about, I just woke up and I know nothing? She said it doesn't matter. Eric Paulsen and

Sally-Ann Roberts had been on the air for awhile, and they needed someone to talk to. She said I could give them a sense of how things were in New Orleans. So in the same clothes from the day before, I headed over the news set and talked to Sally-Ann and Eric for like 15 minutes. I don't know if I gave them any useful information, but it gave the producers time to get another city or state official on the phone.

When I got back to the Communications room I saw an angel. Dave McNamara was standing there, and I finally retrieved my duffle bag. It was like finding a long lost friend. I quickly changed clothes and headed back to the story meeting.

My assignment for the day was to head back to the Causeway Blvd. and Interstate 10 interchange, where rescued people were being dropped off by helicopter. Jim Douglas, a reporter from WFAA in Dallas, was going there as well, so we all went in one van. My photographer was a guy named Casey from Seattle; just one of the many stations that had arrived to help us out. On the way to New Orleans was one of my lowest moments, and I really don't know why. I was driving and thinking about all that we had been through, and I started to think about Betty-Ann and the girls. What must they be thinking about all of this? I don't think I'd even talked to them on the phone since I left on Saturday morning. I wasn't there for them when they needed me, and it really started to get to me. Betty-Ann was doing a great job with the girls, but I'm sure it was not easy. I was fighting back tears, when we rolled up on a State Police road block outside of New Orleans. They said they weren't letting anyone else into the city at this point. Police were trying to limit the people in the city because they said it hampered their rescue efforts. We tried to convince them that we needed to get there to tell the story for the rest of the nation, but they would hear nothing of it. Once a State trooper has made up his mind, there was no changing it, and we headed off on a side street in Laplace. I thought, if we could get to Airline Highway we might have a better chance of getting into the city, because we might encounter some local police and not the State troopers. And it worked--a couple of St. Johns the Baptist Parish deputies recognized me and waved us

through. They seemed to get how important it was for the local stations to be on the ground providing coverage.

When we drove past Zephyr Stadium on Airline Drive about a mile from my house, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The huge parking lot looked like a military camp. There were high water vehicles, tents, helicopters, everything you might see on a military base, and people wearing fatigues were everywhere. It was another one of those moments when you said, man, things are going to be different.

When we made our way back to the I-10 and Causeway Blvd. Interchange, the scene was even bigger than it was the day before. Thousands of people were in a huge line waiting to get on a bus. There were helicopters flying overhead again, landing only long enough to drop off people that had been stranded on their roofs. People were frantically trying to help people get food and water and medical attention, if they needed it. It was still chaotic, but much more organized than it was the day before. Police were keeping us away from the people getting off of the helicopters, and there was more structure to the effort. I was looking for people to interview when a photographer from a Houston TV station told me about 7 kids who got off of a helicopter without parents. They ranged in ages from about 2 to 6 years old. They were being looked after by some nurses and volunteers who were wondering just what they were going to do. The only thing they were able to get from the kids was that they were separated from their mother, Katrina. That's right--the mom's name was *Katrina*. I wasn't sure about the spelling, but couldn't believe the coincidence. I can't imagine a situation where these kids could have been separated from their mother. They were so young.

Deciding that this was going to be the centerpiece of my story, I started interviewing people about the kids. I tried to talk to the kids myself, but they didn't want to be interviewed. Who could blame them, after what they had been through? To everyone there, it was a mystery. They didn't know where the mom was or worse, how they were going to try and find her. I got all the interviews I

needed for the story, and we started to head back to Baton Rouge. On the way, we hit a huge thunderstorm. It was the first rain we'd had since the Hurricane on Monday. As we were driving away, I could only think about the thousands of people sitting there in the rain, waiting to get on a bus to somewhere. They must have been miserable.

When we got back to Baton Rouge, I told everyone about my story about the group of lost kids and that the mom's name was Katrina. They told me to go and edit some of the video from the story, and to get it on the air as soon as possible. After that, I should start working on the package. That's TV terminology for the entire story with interviews and video. I got the information on the air, and then started work on the longer version. While I was working on the story, I realized I would have a real hard time trying to follow the story or update it. I had no idea where the kids were going after leaving the rescue area. I had no idea of the mother's whereabouts. This is just a few days after the storm; it's not like you can call the police or FEMA and ask about specific people, because they didn't know at that point where all the people were going. We knew that a lot of them would be spending some time on the football field at the Houston Astrodome. It was the only place big enough to handle that number of people. I remember seeing rows and rows of cots with a pillow and a blanket neatly folded on each.

Around 6:00 that night, I began an anchor shift with Shauna Sanford, our weekend anchor. I ran the story on the kids while I was anchoring with her. About 7:00 o'clock, I notice out of the corner of my eye, my News Director Sandy Breland standing next to a camera with our other weekend anchor Josh McElveen. Sandy was trying to get my attention for something, but I couldn't hear what she was saying. There were no commercial breaks at this time, so finally I just explained to people at home that my boss Sandy was trying to tell me something. She said, "I need to talk to you". I thought something terrible had happened. I couldn't figure out what would be so important that she would interrupt the broadcast, and need to have Josh with her. We tossed to a press conference at State Police Headquarters, giving me enough time to talk to

Sandy. I said, "My God, what's happening, what's wrong?" She assured me everyone was fine. She wanted to let me know that they were starting to give people time off, and that I wouldn't work on Friday. She told me and Josh to drive to Jackson, Mississippi to see our families. Josh's wife, Erin and their new baby, Kate had evacuated with Betty-Ann to a hotel outside of Jackson. I couldn't believe it. I said yes let's go. But I still had to anchor until they found someone to take my place on the air. A short time later they brought Lee Zurik into anchor, and I couldn't wait any longer. I basically stood up and took my microphone off, and handed it to Lee. I explained to the audience that we were making an anchor change. It wasn't as bad as it sounds, as we made anchor changes like that sometimes since we moved into the Baton Rouge studio. My heart was beating a hundred times a minute. Josh said let's go man, but I wasn't exactly prepared to drive to Jackson. The duffel bag I had gotten back from Dave McNamara that morning was somewhere in the newsroom, and I didn't know where it was. I finally found it, and after giving Sandy a big hug goodbye, Josh and I were off. My car was still in a parking garage in New Orleans so Josh drove. We were both beat, but so very excited to see our families. We didn't call them, as we wanted it to be a surprise. Jackson's about a three hour drive from Baton Rouge, and we thought we'd stop and get a beer for the ride. That's a lot easier than it sounds and yes I know it was wrong to do. At the time it made all the sense in the world. We made a couple of stops before we found a store even open, and then, their beer cases were empty. It was a very weird time. Everything was shut down, there was no place to eat, and you couldn't even buy a beer. We had to make a stop to go to the bathroom, and literally an hour outside of Jackson, we found a place that was open that actually had beer left. We felt like we had won the lottery. It was close to 11:00 at night when we finally rolled into the Studio Plus Hotel. I knew Betty-Ann and the girls were in room 213. I watched Erin get the huge surprise of seeing Josh at the door, before I headed up to 213. I knocked on the door, and I guess because Betty-Ann was used to her family coming over frequently, she opened the door

without asking who it was. If I live to be 100 years old I will never forget the look on her face when she opened the door. It was half delight to see her husband standing before her, and half relief. It was actually a gasp...but one of pure happiness, I'll never forget it...never. She started to cry, and gave me the greatest hug I've ever had. The girls were sleeping in the sofa bed, when I leaned over and gently woke them up. In unison they both screamed "Daddy". It felt so good to have those two little girls in my arms. I didn't want to let go. Betty-Ann ran to the other rooms to let her family know I was there, and everyone came over to say hello. God, it was great to see everyone. They had been through a lot, sitting in a hotel room trying to watch it on television, not knowing what was happening. Not to mention, trying to keep the little ones from being scared, and trying to keep them busy. They had all gone to the Outback that night for dinner, and there were some leftovers which I wolfed down quickly. Everyone went back to their rooms to continue watching CNN for the latest on the storm. At this point, the coverage was the mass of people trying to get bussed out of the Convention Center. It was a horrible scene. The rooms everyone had were adequate. They had a bed and a fold out sofa bed, as well as a little kitchen area with a stove and a refrigerator. It would have been sufficient for a couple of days, but for weeks was difficult.

I climb into the sofa bed with Katie, and Allison moved over to the bigger bed with Betty-Ann. Within minutes I was sound asleep. Another night in a strange bed, but this time, my girls were with me again...and it felt great.

### **Friday, September 2nd**

We woke up relatively early and went over to my brother-in-law, Ron's room, which appeared to be the gathering room for the family to have coffee. Everyone was sitting wherever they could to watch the television. It's what they had been doing since Sunday August 28<sup>th</sup>, and today would be no different. The difference for me is that it wasn't our coverage, but the national network

coverage. Their story centered mostly on the horrific scene at the and the Convention Center. Getting the thousands of people out of town on busses had been a nightmare for days, but by Friday it was finally coming to an end.

By 10:00 that morning, we had to get the girls out of the hotel for a break, and I badly needed some clothes. I had utilized all that I had, and then some, for the last few days. It looked like we were going to be living in Baton Rouge for weeks, if not months, and I needed something to wear. We all went to a nearby store to buy underwear



and pants. I had enough Channel 4 shirts to get through but I needed pants and jeans. When I started to try some on, I realized that I had lost quite a big of weight in the last week. We had been so busy, we ate when we were able to, but didn't worry about it too much, because it just wasn't that important at the time.

We went to the grocery store to get supplies for the room, and to buy some food for dinner at the hotel. Betty-Ann had been doing a great job with the money she had, but she was running low and being out of state, they weren't taking any checks. We stopped at an ATM machine so I could get her some more money to live on. We picked up some nice steaks to cook for that night's meal, and I was excited about just hanging out with the family.

When we got back to the hotel, everyone was pretty much sitting in the same spot watching the Katrina coverage. I realized that's what they've been doing since the storm. Betty-Ann had the girls into a routine of going to the pool in the afternoon, so when we were shopping, I picked up a 3 dollar bathing suit from Wal-Mart. I didn't know you could buy clothes for that little money, but I figured if it lasted a few weeks it was worth it.

All the little things you took for granted were now difficult. It was hard buying things in some stores because all of the power was not back on to the computer systems. Jackson, while being a few hours north of New Orleans, still got hit pretty hard by high winds and rain, and much of the city lost power. Also getting gasoline was really hard. If the station had gas, there were huge lines of 10 cars or more to get in. The area was already feeling the crunch of the Louisiana oil wells and refineries being off line because of the storm, and it would get worse before it got better.

The pool at the Studio Plus was small but nice enough. It was sunny and hot as it had been for days, and we had a nice time playing with the girls. Most of the people staying at the hotel were Katrina evacuees from the New Orleans area. They too, spent the afternoon around the pool trying, it seems, to take a break from the storm coverage. As important as the information was, you really needed to take a break once in a while. I truly needed to take a step back from the coverage for a day, just to get a little perspective.

That night we invited Josh, Erin, and their daughter Kate to the room for a glass of wine after we ate dinner. For as weird as it was to have everyone in a hotel room in North Mississippi, it also seemed kind of normal to have another family over to have a drink.

Betty-Ann and the family picked this hotel because it accepted animals and we had our share. Ron and Carole-Lynn had their Great Dane, Buddy, with them. Betty-Ann's mom, Mrs. McDougall, had her sheltie, Teenie, with her. And Josh and Erin had their black lab, Brady, with them. So it was quite the scene with all the animals and kids and parents trying to live together in several hotel rooms along one hallway.

Josh and I left Thursday night and had to be back at work by 8:00 o'clock Saturday morning, which meant we would have to be up and on the road by 5:30 am. So we were only gone for that one day, but it was so important to me to see the girls. We all went to bed early because we had to get up early. I set the alarm for 4:45am and crawled into bed with Allison.

### Saturday, September 3

The alarm goes off at 4:45am and I literally drag myself out of bed and into the shower. The shower aspect was nice and I stayed in there awhile trying to wake up. I gave the girls a kiss, and Josh and I were on the road back to Baton Rouge.

We had to be back for 8:00 that morning for the story meeting where the assignments for the day were handed out. I knew I would likely be anchoring that night, but I also wanted to get to New Orleans to see what was happening.

Photographer Jimmie Brown and I asked to cover the broken levee at the 17th Street canal. This was the levee break that people had been watching on television. It unleashed a wall of water that knocked huge houses from their foundations when the levees gave way. Jimmy and I knew we would have time to do our story, so we made a couple of stops on the way to the canal. We stopped first at his father-in-law's house in Metairie. He and his wife had not heard from him, and they were worried he might have stayed for the storm. Where he lived had flood waters that got into the houses, and there were many trees down. We pounded on the door but no one came. Worried that something might have happened to him we found a broken window on the side of the house, and Jimmie and I knocked the rest of the glass out and climbed inside. Although it was daylight, it was scary to be in this house. We didn't think anyone was there, but truly what we were checking for was a dead body. The house smelled of old water and mildew. Some furniture was moved out of place, and there seemed to be a lot of glass. Thankfully we didn't find anyone, so we figured he must have evacuated.

We then went to Jimmie's house, not too far away. He had been there before and seen the situation, but now he wanted to try and fix some of the holes in his roof. His house got probably a foot or two of water and there was slime and dirt

all over the floors. It was hard for him to walk through and see all the things that were certainly ruined.

He had picked up some blue tarps to put over the holes in his roof. We found a ladder at a next door neighbor's and he climbed up on the roof to put the tarps down. I stayed at the bottom to steady the ladder. It was brutally hot that day, so while he worked I walked around the front to find some shade and check out the damage. We were in a busy neighborhood not far from a main road and businesses, yet you could hear nothing. It was eerily quiet. No cars no kids, nothing. Every once in a while you could hear Jimmie pounding in another nail. After he finished we headed over to the 17th Street canal. It wasn't far and it took us no time at all because there was no traffic, no traffic lights and you pretty much drove where ever you wanted, even if that meant down the wrong way on a one way. Sometimes you had no choice as trees and electric poles dictated which way you could drive.

When we got to the 17th Street canal, I expected to see a flurry of activity, but it too was relatively quiet. There was a lot of machinery but no action. The only thing going on was a helicopter dropping those huge 3 thousand pound sandbags into the breach in the levee. This was 5 days after the storm, and still the hole in the levee had not been fixed. The plan was to drop the sandbags in and eventually fill up the hole... eventually. It was like dropping a pebble into the ocean. The helicopter would drop the huge white bag into the water, and it would disappear within seconds. We knew this was going to be a long process. At that point, there was just one helicopter flying and dropping the bags, and I thought two or three should be doing it. We were able to talk to an Army Corps of Engineers guy on the scene, and a woman from the East Jefferson Levee District. Part of her concern at that point was checking to make sure the west side of the levee, facing Metairie and Jefferson Parish, was stable. The Corps' big job was to plug the hole, and it was the most important hurdle facing the city. The city couldn't pump out the water until the breach was repaired. The excess water from the city gets pumped into Lake Pontchartrain, and until the breach

gets fixed, the water will flow right back into the city. It was like a circle, and the water level inside the city was not going to go down until the break got repaired. Which again, it was surprising to me that there didn't seem to be a lot of activity there. Jimmy and I wrapped up what we needed to do and started to drive back to Baton Rouge. We stopped at my house in River Ridge, so I could pick up some necessities. Katie needed some of her medicines, and I grabbed some clothes. I was only inside for a couple of minutes but I really missed my house and my family and I had no idea when we would return. My grass was really long. There was no power in the area and trees still littered the streets.

When we got back to Baton Rouge we cut some video of the action at the 17th Street, and I went up on the set to give the anchors the latest. That usually lasts about 5 to 10 minutes, depending on the length of questions. Then I race back to the edit room to start working on a longer version.

It's about this time that Josh and I are trying to figure out where we are going to stay that night. The first night we stayed in Baton Rouge, we stayed in the apartment complex with many other people. We had a key to another apartment in that complex that night, but it was so late we all stayed together. Josh and I figured we would stay in that other room wherever it was. The apartments were not furnished and we didn't have anything to sleep with or on. After I finished my package, Josh and I went into the supply room our company had put together to get us basic supplies, and we picked up as much stuff as we could carry-- including a couple of little metal cots. They didn't have a mattress, but a piece of fabric that you pushed metal poles through. They didn't look like much but we were happy to have that. That night I anchored from 5:00pm to 10:30pm with our Weekend Anchor, Shauna Sanford. A six hour shift can be long, but by this time we were getting guests to just stop by the station. We had been on the air long enough that politicians and state officials knew where we were. And the best way for them to get out information was to come to us. So during daytime hours we would have this sometimes steady stream of people that we would put on the set for questions. That really saved us as it gave us the ability to get information

without having to expend people when we didn't have it. Somewhere during the evening, Congressman Bobby Jindal showed up at the station and with him was House Majority Leader, Tom Delay from Texas. Delay had been indicted for campaign financing fraud, but he and Jindal were here to talk about the delayed Federal response to the storm. We brought them on the set, and halfway through the interview the entire studio goes black. We had this massive power outage throughout the whole building. It's no wonder--we had live trucks and satellite trucks plugged into the building as well as 20 new computers and editors and everything we piled into the PBS station. When the studio went dark we didn't know what to do. We were sitting there with two members of Congress, in the pitch black. We just sat there and waited. We apologized to Jindal and Delay about the problem, but we had no idea how long it would be. Somewhere along the way someone brought in a little pen flashlight so at least we could see each other. Man that was wild. After about 5 or 10 minutes the power suddenly came back on. When we were given the green light, we restarted our interview almost as if nothing had happened. At this point our news was being seen in many parts of the state and region. When the PBS station WLPB put out our news, it went over the air to every PBS station in the state. The signal was also carried in some places in Mississippi and in Houston, Texas. Allot of people were watching our broadcasts, as the other stations still were not back on the air. Some had teamed up with sister stations in Baton Rouge, but they were not doing stuff for their station alone. It was weird, as we didn't really see them before, during or after the storm.

When we got off the air, we were again beat. Josh and I had started the day at 4:45 am in Jackson, Mississippi and ended it 18 hours later in Baton Rouge. My car was still in New Orleans so Josh and I, with our little beds, headed to the apartment complex. It wasn't too far from the station and we found it pretty easily, considering we had only been there once at 2:00 in the morning after drinking.

We opened the door to apartment 4208 and realized this was going to be home for the near future. It was nice and fairly new but empty. It was a two bedroom apartment, so we each headed to our rooms and started trying to figure out how to open these cots. It took awhile, but after about 10 minutes I got my bed together and laid down with that orange and brown blanket the station had given us on Wednesday night, when we first arrived in Baton Rouge. I fished down into my duffel bag and found the small 4x6 framed picture of Betty-Ann and the girls. It had been with me the whole time at the station, the Hyatt, and the transmitter, so I set it down beside my cot for the night. Other than me, it was the only thing in the room. It was our first night in our new home on yet another bed. The apartment had electricity, but no cable TV, no phone and no hot water. We were asleep within seconds.

### Sunday, September 4th

Josh and I get up early and realize we have nothing to eat or drink. I think we both would have killed for a cup of coffee at that point. With me usually anchoring late, we would likely be working different shifts. He had to be in early that morning, so I gave him a ride to the station. My car was still sitting in a downtown New Orleans garage, and I had to find a way to get it, if in fact it was still there. My confidence level was not high. After dropping Josh off at the station, I head off to the grocery store for some food and basics. Most of New Orleans was living in the Baton Rouge area, and the storm had shut off all trucker traffic that normally flows through New Orleans, so it was slim pickins at this huge grocery store. It was weird walking down the aisles of food and seeing a lot of empty shelves. It was kind of scary wondering what the next few weeks were going to be like. I had been on this low carb diet, so I picked up as much meat as I could along with some eggs, pasta and other items. I only spent about 60 dollars because there just wasn't too much to buy. When I got back to the apartment, I had a couple of hours before I had to be at work, so I tried to get

organized. For the first time since I packed my duffel bag on the morning of Saturday August 27th, I unpacked it. For 9 days I'd been living out of this duffel bag. I hung up what clothes I had and ironed a shirt for that day's news. The apartment actually had a washer and dryer, so I did some laundry. We didn't have a television so it was very quiet in the apartment.

I drove to the station about 1:30pm knowing that it would take me awhile, because Baton Rouge had an extra 150,000 people living there and the streets were clogged beyond belief. It took forever to get anywhere.

When I got to the station, I was met at the door by Karen Swensen and Sandy Breland, and I could tell by the look on their faces it wasn't good. They said a friend of ours, Paul Accardo, had killed himself. Paul was a New Orleans Police officer who was dating one of our producers. He was good guy and we all liked him a lot. I couldn't believe it; he was just with us during the storm. I mean nobody saw this coming. They said the producer was a wreck. Our human resources director was with her at the station, but Sandy and Karen said to go talk to her. I felt so bad for her, I mean how much can people take. We had all been through so much. She decided she would take a few days off from work and that was a great idea.

I didn't have to anchor until 5:00pm, so I went to a computer terminal to catch up on the latest information. You needed to have as much information about the day's events as possible, because there were still no scripts--just flying by the seat of your pants. There was no lineup of material. Whenever someone finished their story they went to the set to talk to the anchors. We never knew what was coming next, and when there wasn't a reporter ready or a phone call from an official, the anchors would have to vamp until new material came along. Sometimes that was 5 minutes, sometimes that was an hour. So any material or news you could gather from the internet would be invaluable once you got out there to anchor for 6 or 7 hours straight.

When I went to the set at 5:00pm I was anchoring with Josh. Neither one of us knew it. We were good friends but had never anchored together. It was kind of

weird at first, but we got into a rhythm after a short time. We were starting to get more live capabilities at this point and we would take live shots from the New Orleans area. We took a live picture once, showing this downed helicopter. It looked orange so we thought it was a Coast Guard helicopter. We talked for 20 minutes about this chopper and what it might be, or what might have happened. We really knew nothing because all we were getting was this aerial video of a downed helicopter. After talking about it for 20 minutes, we learned that it is not a Coast Guard helicopter, but a private chopper and that the pilot made it out alright. We felt kind of bad about being wrong, but it was the best information we had at the time.

Around 9:30 that night, Sandy again comes into the studio and tells Josh and me we would be off tomorrow, Monday. They knew it was going to be a long haul, and were worried about burning us out any further. It wouldn't be much time away but it was time. We wouldn't be off the air until 10:30pm, but decided then we would drive straight to Jackson to see the girls. That made the rest of the night drag by. We wouldn't get there until the early morning, and we'd have to be back before the morning meeting on Tuesday, but we didn't care; we were going to see our families. We didn't have any of our clothes or anything, so we stopped by the apartment on the way and picked up some stuff. The same duffel bag I had unpacked only hours earlier, was again being packed for a day trip to Jackson. We grabbed the few beers we had in the refrigerator and hit the road. We were kind of beat this trip, and it was fairly quiet. Josh drove and we got to Jackson around 2:00 in the morning. Betty-Ann was still awake and greeted me at the door. I just saw her, but it felt like weeks ago. She looked tired. I could feel a sense of dread coming over her. What are we going to do? What about the kids? Her mother? We both had so many questions and zero answers. I slid into bed with Katie that night deciding not to wake her.

**Monday, September 5th-Labor Day Holiday**

When we woke up the girls were excited to see that somehow, after they went to bed, I showed up. We sat around in bed just talking. I told them how proud I was of how they were acting and working through the challenges the storm had brought. We went next door to Ron's and Carole-Lynn's room, and there everyone was, sitting in the same spots with their eyes glued to the television. There simply was nothing else to do but watch the storm coverage. I'm not sure how healthy it was for anyone but it's what you did. Ron and Carole-Lynn own a beach house in Bay St.



Louis, Mississippi, and the news in that area was not good. It was not far from ground zero during the storm, and the aerials we saw of Bay St. Louis showed no houses at all. It was like the water just ripped the houses off of their foundations and carried them out to sea. I mean you just saw sticks and clothes hanging from trees. It was hard on them to watch that scene, but again it's what we did most of the time. Betty-Ann and I head back to the store for some food for the night, and another trip to the ATM machine. She still had the money from our last trip, but we just didn't know when I would return and I wanted her to have money.



When we got back it was back to the pool with the girls. Again, it was another hot steamy day. We hadn't had any rain pretty much since the storm.

We decide to cook steaks again, this time on a grill by the pool. It was Labor Day, and for a couple of hours it felt like a holiday. We were all hanging out by

the pool with the grill going, having a beer, watching the kids in the pool. For a little while we forgot what we had been through and what was still ahead. We really needed that time to mentally get away from the storm. We lived it most of everyday, so getting away was crucial. Josh and Erin and Kate came to our room to hang out before turning in around 11:00pm.

For the first time in 11 days Betty-Ann and I sleep the same bed.



### Tuesday, September 6th

Josh was off today, but I had to work. But since I didn't have to be in until the afternoon, we were able to sleep in a little bit. I took his car back to Baton Rouge, and he and Erin and Kate were going to drive back later that day. It didn't make any sense for her to be in hotel room in Jackson by herself for much of the time, so she and the baby and the dog were going to come live with us in the apartment. Along the same lines it didn't make sense for Betty-Ann and the

girls to join me. In Jackson, she had her family and a support group. The girls had some playmates, and going to the store and getting gas was easier in Jackson than it was in Baton Rouge. Not to mention, I was hardly ever at the apartment at all anyway.



When I got to the station in Baton Rouge, you could see our organization really taking shape. There was a message board leading into the newsroom with news and notes about the day. We had a supply room for different necessities that we would need, and the snack room was now filling with food. The station would send out to get lunch and dinner for the crew, which at this point was huge. We had people from all over the country working with us. It was quite an operation. It was still a huge national story as the city was still underwater. With the equipped snack room, supply room, and large news team, I was again reminded- we were going to be here awhile. When I got to the station I wolfed down some pizza, and started to prepare for the show. But before I could do that we were called into the supply room for a round of tetanus shots. There were a lot of

stories about disease and the like from the sewage and chemicals in the water in New Orleans, and we and our station didn't want to take any chances. That night I would be anchoring with my co-anchor, Karen Swensen from 5:00pm to 10:30pm. Again, that's a 5 and a half hour shift, which is unusually long, but compared to what we had been doing, it seemed like nothing. It was still a very chaotic show with little structure but a lot of valuable news. It was still driven by the bevy of news reporters who would come up to the set and bring the latest news from wherever they were that day. They would come in one after another sit down and talk about what they saw and heard. By this point we were getting several news conferences a day from the State Police Headquarters, where FEMA and the other disaster teams were stationed. We would carry those press conferences live in their entirety. It was a chance to get some big picture news from state and federal officials, and it gave us a chance on the set to catch our breath and see what's next. It was a long stint on the set, but the time always flew by. We were all still trying to get our arms around the nations worst natural and man made disaster. It still dominated the national newscasts and we were a little over a week into the story.

Even though the city was still very much underwater, the search and rescue teams were now going through the neighborhoods on boats looking for people to rescue or dead bodies. This had been going on pretty much since the storm, but now there were teams in from all over the country to help. In the days immediately following the storm, there were estimates from city officials that the death toll could be 10, 15 maybe 20 thousand. The thought of that really hit hard and we were all scared to see what the search and rescue teams would turn up. The teams would get to a house and search inside for any signs of life. After the search they would take a can of spray paint and draw a big circle. Inside of the circle would be where they were from, when they searched the house and if any bodies were found. If the bottom of the circle had a one on it, it meant one dead person was found inside. Because they were doing the searches by boat, it was going to take many days to complete even the first sweep of the city.

Karen Swensen and I had been friends since she showed up at the station in the early 1990's. Her dad worked for the Federal Government so she moved around, and for a time she lived in Northern Virginia in Fairfax County. It was near where I grew up in Manassas, and we actually knew some of the same people. That was wild. We always got along great, and in August of 2003 we were both thrilled to find out we would be anchoring together on the 10:00pm news. Anchoring with her was easy. We both had a pretty good rhythm with each other and rarely stepped on each others toes. Her husband is a New Orleans Police officer who had been in the Superdome for 6 days during the worst of it. That aspect was very hard on her. I remember her getting a phone call from him one night at the dome, and he suddenly cut her off by saying, "that guy's got a gun" and then she heard gunshots and the phone went dead. She, as most people would, lost it. To make matters worse, their little daughter Catherine had evacuated before the storm with some of John's family members. She was being well cared for, but I know they were worried about her and they never imagined it would be so long before they saw her. Karen was staying at the house of one of the LSU Professors who helped get us on the air for the Baton Rouge team, when we split up before the storm. I think her dog "Elvis" was with her as well, a very well traveled dog.

When I got home, Josh and Erin were still awake and they had made a big pot of spaghetti, so I had a plate as we talked before bed. It was well after midnight when we finally went to sleep. It had now been one full week since the storm hit. It had been the longest 7 days of our lives.

### Wednesday, September 7th

It is becoming increasingly difficult to be without my own car. I have to figure out a way to get to New Orleans to check on it soon, as I'm forced to bum rides to get anywhere.

That morning one of our producers Dominic Massa gave me a ride to the funeral of New Orleans Police officer, Paul Accardo. This was an awful start to the day. We weren't able to stay long as we had a meeting back at the station with the President and General Manager of our corporation.

Robert Decherd was flying in from Dallas to talk to everyone about the coverage of the storm and more importantly the outlook for the future of our station.

I had only met Mr. Decherd a few times, so this was big deal for him to come and talk to us. He spoke very proudly of the work we had accomplished over the past 7 days. The sacrifices each person had made to put their personal lives to the side for the coverage of the storm. He told us that BELO, our owner, was putting one thousand dollars in everyone's account so that we would have money until the next paycheck. To be honest, I didn't know at the time when we got paid again. It was a nice gesture, but probably the best news he delivered is that people would be guaranteed a job for at least a year from the storm. New Orleans was going to be a much smaller city in the future, and we would be losing some significant revenue as we spent millions covering the storm. Besides all that gloom and doom, we felt good we would at least have jobs for the next year. It was starting to set in how difficult the next year was going to be. We were going to lose a lot of people who just didn't want to stay around any more. We had already lost some people who left for the storm and just never came back. It was very tough stuff to listen too. Our futures were so uncertain. That to me was the hardest part, as you couldn't look at the big picture of anything because no one knew what the big picture was going to look like tomorrow, let alone a year from now. The city is still full of water, slowly being drained by the pumps and we had a long way to go.

Someone at the meeting referred to our call letters, WWL, as standing for "we won't leave". We had been the only station on the air during the storm and still all of our competitors had not made it back on the air by themselves. One station had teamed up with an affiliate in Baton Rouge, and got on the air that way. And another was working through a sister station in Jackson, Mississippi and another

was not on the air at all, and didn't know when they would be. At the time our coverage on the Louisiana Public Broadcasting station, and on our internet site still dominated.

Karen and I were set to anchor again from 5:00pm to 10:30pm. It appeared that was going to be our shift, as people were getting settled a little bit into routines. I spent the afternoon doing what everyone had been trying to do since the storm, register with FEMA. We were going to be covered by insurance for any damage we had, but everyone was told to register with FEMA as there would be assistance since we were all displaced from our homes because of the storm. This was easier said than done. The number was 1-800-621-FEMA. We must have said it a million times on the air. But the problem was everyone along the Gulf Coast was trying to do the same thing. So you had to be lucky to get someone to answer. At the same time I was trying to reach my insurance company, State Farm. As the biggest insurer in the state, this too was not easy. After continually trying to reach FEMA, hitting redial every few minutes I finally got through and got a registration number. It was like I won the lottery. So many people had tried for days...that's right, days...and not gotten through yet. I also spoke to State Farm and got a claim number from them too. It really was my lucky day.

Tommy Capella an old hanging out buddy from my days at the bars, "Par Four's and "Parkway Tavern", was now a member of the Jefferson Parish Council, and he would drop by almost on a nightly basis to give us an update. Most of the politicians knew to come to us if they wanted to get news out to people scattered throughout the state and watching on the internet. Thank God they came by for the interviews, as it helped us fill time and we couldn't get to them on a regular basis.

We got off the air at 10:30pm and headed home. BELO had provided furniture for the apartment, which was nice. It was actually starting to feel like home a little bit. At least I knew I was going to sleep in the same place for a few days. We had beds and a couch but no phone or television. So there wasn't much to

do when I got home. I didn't have anything to read, and we didn't have a television, so I just went into my room and tried to sleep. A lot of stuff was going through my head and I missed the girls very much. I talked to them a couple of times today and they were all doing as well as can be expected. The cramped quarters were starting to get to them a little bit. That's a lot of people in a close area for a long period of time. It wasn't as hard to reach them by phone since I was in Baton Rouge. When I traveled down to New Orleans for stories, the phones didn't work very well, but in Baton Rouge you could get through. I didn't know when I'd see them again, and I couldn't wait, but Betty-Ann was doing a great job holding the family together.

#### Thursday, September 8th

Still no car, and its really becoming a pain. I borrow Erin's car to go and run an important errand, and I didn't know where to start. I need a haircut and badly. Johnelle in New Orleans has been cutting my hair for more than 10 years and now I'm in Baton Rouge trying to find a place that's open, that you don't need an appointment, and someone who can take me right now. That would have been tough even pre-Katrina, but post storm even more so. I just started driving looking for places, and the first couple I went into didn't work out. On my third try I found a lady who could take me in a little while. She was nice and we talked extensively about the storm, and what was going on in New Orleans. But we talked so long, I think she lost track of how much she was cutting because it was way too short. Oh well, the length of my hair at the time seems kind of petty, considering what everyone else was going through. But again, another indication of how the simple things in life, like a haircut, were now difficult.

After the haircut I put some gas in Erin's car and was happy to find no lines at the pumps. It had not been that way just a couple of days ago. It was \$2.59 a gallon and we were told prices were going to go even higher because many of the oil refineries were shut down in the Gulf because of the storm.

Erin gave me a ride to work and traffic getting there was horrible. Baton Rouge is having a hard time adjusting to the influx of New Orleanians in town.

Erin told me she saw some Channel 6 reporters doing some work from their station in New Orleans, and she wanted to know if we were back at our station yet. We weren't, so I told Sandy and Bud about it when I got to work, but they assured me that Channel 6 was just back there doing live reports and they weren't back in their station. They told me that we were on cable affiliates across the state, and that almost 100 percent of our coverage was being carried on all of the public broadcasting stations in the state.

But that day we did start doing live shots for the evening shows from our station in the French Quarter. Anchor Dennis Woltering went to the city to do the live shots, so I had to go in early and fill in anchoring for Dennis. It was going to be a long day of anchoring, probably in the 9 or 10 hour range. I anchored the early afternoon with Jenifer Huntley, our 5:00am anchor. She's a sweet girl and very talented, but we had never anchored together so it's a little difficult at first but then it's fine. There's just so much time to fill and we were still working without scripts. We would just go up to the set with notes we might have retrieved from the wire, and anchor for several hours, mostly without any breaks. We didn't have commercials, it wasn't even our station. Jenifer and I caught a break because at 3:00 in the afternoon, we were taking a break from our continuous coverage to air a special episode of "Oprah", which was dedicated entirely to Katrina, so it really wasn't a break from coverage--only "our" coverage. It was the first time we had taken a real show of sorts, other than our news coverage. It was the episode of Oprah going into the Superdome for the first time, and the Police Chief, Eddie Compass telling her the horrible stories that took place while the evacuees were in the Dome.

That night from 5:00pm to 10:30pm, I again anchored with Karen, and it was a pretty uneventful night and we didn't have too many of those.

Some of the reporters, producers, and photographers that flew in from other BELO stations are now starting to leave and head back to their stations. They've

been a big help and we truly hate to see them go. We were wondering how we were going to cover this huge story with our tired, depleted staff. It was good to get perspective from reporters from other BELO stations, and see how their work compares to ours. BELO has owned us since 1994 and I know they like us because we make them a lot of money, but we never felt a real strong bond between corporate and us. I think over the past week our relationship has changed. BELO truly sees what kind of employees it has in WWL, and there is a closeness that wasn't there before.

After the 10:30pm show the General Manager, Bud Brown was having a station get together at a local bar, "The Fox and the Hound". It was nice not having to go back to the empty apartment, but it was nothing like that first night we got to Baton Rouge and had the get together at "Chimes". The emotional level just wasn't there. People were tired and worried. Bud was there and reassuring people that everything was going to be alright. He's been great through this mess from the beginning supporting us all the way. He has a good sense of humor, which is important right now. It was nice having a couple of beers and blowing off some steam, but I was home and asleep by 1:00 in the morning.

### Friday, September 9th

Up at 7:15am to ride to work with Josh, as I still have no car. But that is my top priority for the day, get my car. I don't have to anchor until the afternoon so the plan was to hitch a ride with a reporter team into the city, and then drive my car back to Baton Rouge. GM Bud Brown asks me if I can find his car, also left at the Hyatt Hotel, and start it up, as it's been sitting in the parking garage for more than a week.

I get a ride into the city with reporter Lee Zurik and photographer Geoff Hackett. As usual, we spent the entire hour long ride talking about nothing but the storm and the station's future. So much indecision. These kinds of conversations dominated everything we did.

Getting into the city this time wasn't so hard. We went through the Uptown area to get towards City Hall, which is where Lee was heading for a press conference. The Hyatt hotel was close by, and I could see if Betty-Ann's car was even still there or if it would start. There had been news reports that all cars in the area had been stolen or vandalized. My car was in a parking garage right beside the Superdome. People stranded in the Dome were looking for food and water and were breaking into cars to get it. When the water went down, the cars were being stolen as people left town.

Going through uptown was unreal. There was military everywhere you looked. Audubon Park had been taken over by military teams and National Guard from across the nation. You just couldn't believe how much military was now here. There were tents and trucks and jeeps and equipment in every direction. Sadly, we needed them long before now, though we were still happy to have them. Thousands of military personnel and media...that was it. Very few people just media and military. I know the local police were grateful for the military help, as they had to be working on fumes. I can't help but wonder how things could have been different if the military presence had been here in the hours after the storm. It's not like we didn't know it was coming. Had they arrived on Tuesday or Wednesday, how many lives might they have saved? We are told by city officials that only 10 thousand people remain in the Metropolitan area. The people that were in the city now simply refused to leave. People won't leave their pets. That's why they stayed in the first place, and they're not going to leave now. We had animal shelters in from Texas and other states trying to rescue the animals so the people will leave. There are reports that the water still covering much of the city is what they called a "toxic sludge" from all of the chemicals and oil and gas in the floodwaters. The city is threatening to force people to leave the city, but that hasn't happened yet, and I doubt it will ever come to that. I suspect the city is bluffing, as I see they have no way of making people leave now.

After being dropped off at City Hall, I walk over to the Hyatt parking garage and the smell in the city is horrible. There is filth everywhere and everything is a light brown from the silt and dried mud left from the water. Most of the downtown area had been drained of water, though probably 60 percent of the city was still underwater. Unbelievably I remember what floor I parked Betty-Ann's car on after we evacuated from the station to the Hyatt on Sunday August 28th. And there it was--Betty-Ann's Jeep Grand Cherokee. It was filthy and dusty but it was there and it started up. What a relief, as I had no jumper cables or other options. Now all I had to do was find Bud's car and I can head back. I searched and searched on every floor but I could not find it. I'm thinking his car had to have been stolen, as I looked everywhere. After a half an hour I head down in front of the Hyatt, and see another entrance, I walk up a ramp and there it was, finally. It too started right up, and I let it run for 5 or 10 minutes to charge the battery.

I then headed over to the station to pick up a videotape of a story I was working on before Katrina. Strangely it was a story about the 40th anniversary of Hurricane Betsy. Before Katrina, Betsy was the worst storm New Orleans had suffered and one everyone remembered. Until Katrina. It was just weird that I was interviewing a family in St. Bernard Parish about a Hurricane a few days before Katrina was even headed for us. Now I'm sure the family I talked to lost everything. We wanted to air the story on September 9th which is the anniversary, but the tapes were down at the station. I drive up to the back of the station and there are two armed guards standing there, and I don't mean armed with pistols, but with machine guns. I show them my badge and they let me in. The entire station is empty and for the most part dark. Our station doesn't have a lot of windows, so looking for the tapes wasn't easy in the dark, but I did find them.

I was going to stop by the house before heading back, but the problem now was how to get back. Parts of the interstate were still underwater, so I knew I couldn't take the interstate all the way back. But I thought I could take it for awhile, then jump off on Carrollton Avenue to bypass where the water was. I

figured this would save me a lot of time than winding back through the city streets. So I jumped on the interstate and headed towards Carrollton. I should have realized that, as the only car on a main interstate, I had made a bad decision. The exit for Carrollton Avenue was covered with water, and then I realized I was stuck. I couldn't go forward because I knew the road was covered at the 17th street canal. The only option I had was to go back, and since I couldn't get off on the exit to turnaround, I had to turn the car around on the interstate and head back driving in the wrong direction on Interstate 10. Man was that a surreal feeling. I'm the only car out there and I'm driving the wrong way. It then hit me that I was not going to have an exit with signs, as you're not supposed to be driving this direction. I just knew I had to get off of this road fast. I took the first road I could find which is again, a single lane entrance onto the interstate that I'm now using as an exit. I got back down to an open road and decided to head back to Baton Rouge the same way I came into town. What an idiot I was, thinking I could find a new way back without water.

I get to the house to pick up of all things, bills I needed to pay. We weren't getting any mail, but these were bills that hadn't been paid since before Katrina. I got some new checks and additional check books for Betty-Ann, and headed into the backyard.

Betty-Ann's sister Patti's husband, Mike Reith, is a Jefferson Parish Firefighter, and sometime after the storm he'd gone to everyone's house in the family and emptied their refrigerators, unplugged them, and put them outside. It's hard to imagine what a big deal this was. Everyone thought they'd be out of their house for a few days, not a few months, so everyone's fridge was full of stuff that, since the storm, had been sitting in the refrigerator without power and rotting. Mike had taken the stuff out of our refrigerators, and put them into our trashcans and taped them shut. Still the smell was horrible, but man was I thankful that smell wasn't in my house.

I look at the grass in my backyard and wonder when I'll ever be able to mow it. Man it was getting long. While in the backyard, I noticed one of the trees at my

neighbor John's house had fallen on his garage. A few months earlier, one of my sick trees fell partly on his garage, doing some damage. Now his tree had done considerably more damage, and I was like, well I guess I'm off the hook. It's weird what stupid thoughts go through your head at times like this.

I'm finally on the road back to Baton Rouge, and now a little late. I'm supposed to anchor for Dennis, who again is in New Orleans reporting, and I don't have a lot of time. I need gas, but there's no time to stop. I roll the dice and pull up to the Public Station with 0 miles on the display of miles until empty. It hit 0 about 2 miles from the station, but it just kept going.

I walked straight into the station and pretty much into the studio. I'm anchoring with our morning show anchor Jen Huntley. Pretty normal show, but we decide that some words are getting way overused, mostly by us, in the days after the storm. Words like surreal, normalcy, devastation, sense of and certainly. We want to not say them but the truth is it's hard sometimes, especially when you anchor in such long stints.

Karen Swensen has gone with her husband to pick up her daughter Catherine, whom she's not seen since two days before the storm. Catherine had been with family first in Memphis, Tennessee, but now is in Boston with Karen's parents. I can't imagine what that reunion is going to be like. I remember how mine was with my girls in Jackson, and that had been over a week ago. Karen truly needed a break. I mean, she'd been without her husband and her daughter, and her house got nailed by the storm. Karen and Catherine and John were going to all come back and live with us in the apartment in Baton Rouge. Three families and two babies. It was going to be interesting, but we all needed each other in a big way right now.

Somewhere in between anchor shifts, I talked to Betty-Ann on the phone and she stuns me with the news she is looking for a school in Jackson, Mississippi to enroll Allison. It made sense, but I just hadn't thought about it yet. We weren't going to be home anytime soon, and having Allison just sitting in a hotel room all day was not good for her, or anyone for that matter. But thinking about my little

girl going to school in Jackson, Mississippi with me not being there was going to be tough.

I was going to be off the next two days so after the show, I was planning on driving to Jackson and be with the family. When we got off the set I realized I had no gas and I mean *no gas*. I found one of our engineers, Tony Cefalu, after the show and he said I could fill up from the station's tank in the back. The station had purchased a tank with gas after the storm, as it was becoming scarce and we just simply had to have it. Tony really saved my ass that night. I stopped by the apartment, grabbed some clothes, and was on my way to Jackson. I stopped off to get a drink at a convenience store, and a guy from Kenner recognized me. We talked for a while. The first question in everyone's conversation now is always, "How much water did you get"? He seemed pretty down and very happy to talk to a familiar face. He had a lot of questions about the future that I just couldn't answer. I don't know if I made him feel any better, but I tried.

Now I'm off to Jackson for the first time in Betty-Ann's car. The radio stations are nothing but storm, storm, storm, and frankly I needed a break. However, there were no CD's in the car--only a Barney tape. I ride to Jackson in silence and get to the hotel at 1:30 in the morning.

### Saturday, September 10th

We don't really have any plans for the day but the key will be to get the girls out of the hotel for a while and away from the television. It had been a couple of weeks now, and everyone was feeling a little cramped.

We decide to take a drive out to where we're thinking about enrolling Allison for school. It's about 10 miles outside of Jackson, in a beautiful area near this huge reservoir. It was a really pretty drive, and we talked about what it would be like to live here. We never wanted to leave New Orleans, but that's where everyone's mind was at this time. I mean you drive around and think, could I live here?

Allison's school was really nice and new. It wasn't open, but we kind of walked around to get a feel of the place. She wasn't exactly looking forward to it, but seemed to be O.K with the fact she'd be going to a strange place. I know inside she was really scared.

It was so nice to be with my family, away from the chaos, and the flooding, and the horrific scenes we were dealing with on a daily basis. Jackson had become my little oasis, and I so looked forward to the small amount of time I was able to spend there. The girls were taking it all pretty well. I really don't know how much they knew about what was going on. I mean, they watched it all day on TV and knew Dad was a part of it, but the whole, "what's going to happen to us", I don't think they really understood.

Carole-Lynn and Ron had left early and traveled to Bay St. Louis to check on their beach house. Bay St. Louis was pretty close to ground zero, and there wasn't much left of the town. It's like the water came in and scraped the place clean of all houses and trees. I had seen aerials of the Bay from work and it didn't look good. I had helped Ron build the place and we used it often, so it was very special to us.

When they got back I could see in their faces what they found. It was bad, but surprisingly part of the house made it. The house was split in two by a large pine tree, but because it was 13 feet off the ground, it survived, some of it at least. They had taken home video so we spent the afternoon watching the tape. It was hard to take. It was like an explosion. There was stuff everywhere. Clothes hanging from trees 30 feet in the air. There were a lot of tears, but we were all kind of amazed there was anything there at all. It was hard for them to walk around their house and see so many of their belongings strewn about on the ground.

Later that day, we did what we always did at the hotel...swim. Going to the little pool each afternoon had become the routine. Most of the people in the hotel had evacuated from the storm, some from New Orleans, so we all gathered around the pool in the afternoon and compared stories and the latest news we heard.

Everyone was so nice but I felt so bad for them. I mean we knew we had some damage, but as soon as the Parish opened back up, we would be able to go home. Many others had no home to go to.

That night we ordered pizza and Ron and I stayed up late and watched the LSU-Arizona St. football game. Pre-Katrina, this is probably what we would have been doing normally, but now were sitting in a pitch dark hotel room with the sound turned down low so as not to wake any of the other people sleeping. It was kind of weird but neat too, because it felt normal and that was nice. LSU won the game on a last second touchdown pass and we yelled and screamed waking everyone up. That was a nice way to end the day.

I crawled into bed that night to find little Katie already there with Betty-Ann. I slid in there too and drifted off to sleep. It was crowded, but nice, and I usually hate sleeping too close to anyone. The storm had changed a lot of things.

### Sunday, September 11th

I woke up in the morning and turned the TV on to the 9-11 memorials. With all that we've been doing, I forgot about the September 11th attacks. Channel 4 had always held a bell ringing ceremony to remember the tragedy. We do it from several locations with the anchors ringing little bells to commemorate the event. Karen Swensen and I usually do it from of the St. Bernard Cultural Center in Chalmette. People there are very patriotic and passionate, and there's always a good turnout. There'll be no such memorial this year. As I'm writing this, St. Bernard Parish, all of it, is underwater and will be for days to come.

Betty-Ann and the family headed off to church. I stay back to be with Katie who, at 4 is not quite ready for an hour long mass. When Katie was two, she was diagnosed with Autism. It was jarring news for us. In the past 18 months Katie

has seen a slew of doctors and specialists. Katie is taking special one on one speech sessions and occupational therapy as well.

Kids with Autism usually suffer from food allergies, and Katie is on a gluten/casein free diet meaning she can't have wheat or dairy products and that's about 80 percent of all food. That aspect has been particularly rough. We get a lot of Katie's food from specialty stores on the internet. We recently got a shipment of her food from the Miss Roben's company in Maryland. Betty-Ann had changed the shipping address to the hotel in Jackson. The company sent the order to the hotel with a note, "We put some extra goodies in as well, on us. We know what you must be going through down south, and our hearts and prayers are with you." I carried the note around with me for a week. It struck a chord with me that many people around the country were behind us, and supporting us, and caring for us. It meant a great deal to me, especially at the time... I mean, we didn't know these people and had never talked to them, but after having talked to Betty-Ann, they decided to help out. Everybody outside of this tragedy has been great. Anywhere we went in Jackson, if people found out we were from the New Orleans area, they would bend over backward to help out. It really made a difference to know others cared so much and that we weren't going through this alone.

I received a bunch of e-mails from college friends, some of whom I haven't heard from in years, all asking what they could do to help out. It was great to hear from them. It really blew my mind that they would take the time to find our website and then search for our "blog" to write me a note. Man, it made my day when I read it.

After watching the 9-11 memorials on television, Betty-Ann and I took the girls on a picnic out at the reservoir, I think it's called the Ross Barnett Reservoir. It's a beautiful place with boats and marinas. It was a beautiful, sunny day and there were dozens of sailboats out. We had a great time. It was a nice escape, lying out on the blanket, feeling the warm breeze, and looking up at the sunny sky through the trees. For an afternoon we didn't talk about Katrina or even think

about it. We watched the girls run and chase bugs, and enjoyed the moment. They were few and far between these days.

### Monday, September 12

We had to wake up at 6:00 in the morning to get Allison ready for her first day of school--for the second time in one year. This time, in Jackson. She was scared and nervous about going to a strange school, but she is a true extrovert, and I felt she would be OK once she got there and started making friends--which she does easily.

The school, Northshore Elementary, is not too far away from the Reservoir where we had the picnic on Sunday. The area is beautiful with a lot of new, nice houses. Everything looks so new. The school is only 2 years old, much newer than the school Allison goes to in River Ridge. When we walked in, the people couldn't have been nicer. They were practically waiting for us at the front door. They gave Allison a big hug and told her how pretty she looked. We felt very comfortable leaving her, but it was still sad getting in the car and pulling out. I missed her already. Soon after that I had to get on the road and back to Baton Rouge and work. The real world.

When I left Friday night, we were told that today would be a normal day. We would be doing a 5:00pm and 6:00pm newscast, and then maybe something extended at night. But on my way back to Jackson, I got a call and was told to be on the set at 1:00pm to anchor for 2 hours. I was going to make it in time, but it was going to be close. Despite the horrendous traffic in Baton Rouge, with all the new people living there, I made it with time to spare. And the good news for the station was that Angela Hill was back. She was out of town on a cruise for the storm, and wasn't able to get back in. Then she traveled to Boston until she was able to get to Baton Rouge. She couldn't have felt worse but on a cruise and unable to do much. We needed the anchor help badly.

It was a pretty good news day. Things were happening, which meant anchoring 4 1/2 hours made the day move quickly. The city of Kenner was talking about letting its residents return soon. New Orleans and Jefferson Parish and St. Bernard Parish have all been closed to anyone since the storm. Orleans still had a significant amount of water, and Jefferson was without power and water so residents couldn't come back. St. Bernard was just devastated. The City of New Orleans was draining slowly, and at the morning news briefing we were told the death toll estimates of 10,000 people or more were going to be way off. Thank God. Following the initial sweep of the city looking for bodies, they had not found the number of bodies they anticipated. There were still areas they could not get too, but the initial numbers were better than expected. I can't tell you what a relief that was. I had envisioned the slow, arduous process of pulling bodies out of houses and attics for months, and that process being very public. But the city said television cameras would not be allowed to follow the recovery teams around the city, and in a way I was happy for that. The last thing New Orleans needed was CNN televising all the bodies being recovered. We didn't need that. Many of these people had died an unspeakable death, and to make their body count a visual part of the story is unnecessary and disrespectful. Simply relating the body count is enough.

I got home late and went straight to bed, and it was only then that I forgot that today was my sister Carol's birthday. I know she'll understand. I've forgotten before and wasn't covering a hurricane

### Tuesday, September 13th

Karen Swensen is still gone in Boston but is scheduled to return tonight, late around 11:00pm. Josh and Erin and Kate are off for a couple of days, so they've gone back to New Orleans to work on their house. That's what everyone did whenever they got a little time. We were all living and working in Baton Rouge, but our lives and homes are in New Orleans. It had now been two weeks since

the storm, and many of the houses hadn't been touched. The ones in New Orleans were still underwater, though the level had gone down. Our house didn't have a lot of damage, but it has just been sitting there without power since the storm.

Josh and Erin didn't want to have to deal with their dog while they were working on their house, so I offered to sit with Brady, their black Labrador. He's a nice dog and very timid, not like most of the labs I'd dealt with. For the first time since I could remember I had a place all to myself. It was kind of nice on one hand, but kind of lonely on the other. I was glad to have Brady around with me. It made me think of our dog Rossi, who died three months before Katrina. I missed her, but was very thankful that my family wasn't also dealing with a dog while trying to evacuate a hurricane, and hoping to find a hotel that would accept pets.

We still had no TV or phone in our apartment, so being able to walk Brady around to go to the bathroom helped pass the time.

At the station we had settled into a routine for our newscasts. We would do two hours from 1:00pm to 3:00pm, then a 5:00pm and a 6:00pm. Then we'd take a little break and come back and do an hour from 8:00pm to 9:00pm, and then our normal 10:00pm news. It was still 4 1/2 hours of local news everyday, and it was taxing because some people were taking some time away to get their lives in order. And we were losing people. One of our reporters and a photographer didn't comeback after the storm, and one of our directors quit in tears, during a newscast. Everyone was working under so much intense pressure, and the future of our lives just looked so bleak, it freaked people out. Today I anchored all of the shows because Dennis was doing stories in the city. It was a long day but it moves faster when you're busy. Just sitting around there and wondering about the future is not healthy.

There is a little break room next to the news room, and for the last week or so the station has been stockpiling it with food and drinks. They would order out lunch and dinner and there were all kind of snacks. Today I realized that I was putting on weight since the storm and because of this room of food. I'd been

eating like crazy lately. Whenever I'd walk past the break room I'd grab something to eat. It was getting a little out of control. Oh well.

One of our reporters Bill Capo, a veteran of 20 plus years, traveled today to Plaquemines Parish. It was ground zero for landfall in Louisiana, and the bottom half of the parish that is between the gulf and the Mississippi River just got flattened. Bill's story was so awful to watch. It was really the first time we'd been able to travel to the southern end of the parish because of the high water. There was nothing there. I should say there was nothing where it was supposed to be. These huge fishing vessels, not boats, but vessels, were thrown around like matchbox cars. They were on top of levees and houses, in roadways, everywhere. That was one depressing story. Bill was talking to these people whose lives had just been totaled. I mean, where do you start when you have nothing left?

I got off work around 10:30pm and headed straight home to make sure Brady got out of the apartment before going to the bathroom. I walked Brady around and then settled in to bed. Josh and Erin had left their laptop computer in the apartment and they had this DVD from the "Curb Your Enthusiasm" show on HBO. I hadn't really watched it much and wasn't a big fan, but I put it in and sat in bed and watched it. It was really funny and good. And I realized how much I missed just watching television. It was nice not to have to stare at the ceiling trying to fall asleep.

### Wednesday, September 14th

Some of our parent company officials came to the station today to make some announcements and to see how we were all doing. They reassured us that everyone was doing a fantastic job and the corporation would be behind us and support us. The company said we would be getting a bonus for all of our hard work. If the station does well during the year, we sometimes get a bonus. But this year, the station only had a little more than half the year to sell advertising.

That all stopped on August 29th. Because of that, we weren't expecting to get a bonus for 2005 but they said based on what we had made in advertising through August, we would still get a bonus.

We were doing alright financially right now because we weren't spending anything. Betty-Ann and the girls were spending some in Jackson, but not much, and I really wasn't spending anything. The station paid our rent and even fed us most of the time. So, all of my paychecks and the bonus were adding up in our checking account. Despite the bonus news, which was great, I could see the moral of our newsroom declining. People had been through so much, it was starting to show. People were tired and so weary about the future.

There is talk about returning our operation to New Orleans, but logistically that was going to be difficult. Many people didn't even have homes to go to and some parts of the city were still underwater. The station would have to put everyone up in hotels, and that wasn't happening right now in New Orleans. There weren't any hotels open. I anchored all of the shows again today but it was pretty uneventful. I mean lots of news, and most of it bad.

Reporter Bill Capo, a day after watching the devastation in Plaquemines, traveled to see what was left of the Lake Catherine area. This is a little sliver of land between Louisiana and Mississippi, sitting in the middle of Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Catherine. Not a good place to be, and there didn't appear to be anything left of Lake Catherine. It used to be homes and camps along the lakes, but the storm surge just wiped everything out. Man, what a depressing site. I travel the road sometimes when I go to the beach house in Bay St. Louis, and it was hard seeing only sticks were homes used to sit.

### Thursday September 15th

Finally some of the areas around New Orleans are opening up and letting people get back to their homes. It has been a long time and people need to

restart their lives. The area we live in, River Ridge, is opening as is Kenner and Harahan. These areas were not hit too hard.

The city of New Orleans is also starting a re-entry plan. They start letting people come back, depending on their zip code. There were some parts of the city that didn't get water, and those people would be allowed to come back. The New Orleans Police Department said it was too early to bring people back, but the Mayor said they need to come home.

I got up early to go to the house to see if we have power and water. Betty-Ann and the girls want to come home, but if we don't have power and water, what's the use? Not to mention there are no stores, no gas stations, nothing. How would they live? It would be too hard to bring the girls back now. That was not going to be news they wanted to hear. There were so many decisions to be made. They probably wouldn't be starting school until early October back in River Ridge, so just when do you bring the kids back? There is nothing for them to do but sit and watch DVD's on television. There are no pools open, no malls, and most of their friends wouldn't be back anyway. So bringing them back isn't the answer, but I know sitting in that hotel has gotten really old by now.

I'm only there for a day or two each week, so it's like a vacation for me. But for them, it's one room and one bathroom for three weeks now, with no end in sight.

When I got back to the house, I am met with the long grass of my front yard. Again, when in the world am I going to cut the grass? Not anytime soon. Oh well. I can't believe it but my house has power and water. You can't believe how happy I was. I mean these were two things you totally take for granted until they're gone. I tried to get the gas on which fuels our cook top and our water heater but couldn't. I could get it turned on, but I couldn't ignite the pilot light on the heater. I didn't know how long to sit there holding a match with the gas on, so I decided to wait until later. We weren't going to be living there for a while, anyway.

My brother-in-law had already emptied our refrigerator into trash cans outside, but now I had to get these trash cans to the street. I had no idea if any trash

truck was coming anytime soon, but I at least had to get them to the curb. I taped up the lids on the cans and hauled them out. They were incredibly heavy and stinky. Old food had been sitting in there for weeks in the hot New Orleans sun. And you tape the lid because you're not throwing the food inside the cans away...you're throwing the entire can away. Take the whole thing, please. Everyone would be doing the same thing.

Back here at the apartment in Baton Rouge, Josh and Erin and Brady decided to move back to their house in Kenner. It would be easier for them to have all of the baby's things, so they moved out. I'll miss them, as it was nice to have people to hang out with in the apartment. Karen and her husband John and their daughter Catherine would still be there so that was nice.

I heard from my sister, Carol tonight and that was nice. As expected, she totally understood about me missing her birthday. It was nice hearing from her and knowing that everyone was so concerned about our plight. She said her daughter Casey's class in school was taking donations to send to the Gulf South. That was so nice and generous.

I'm still doing a lot of anchoring with Dennis in New Orleans most of the afternoon and night. I tell Sandy, my News Director, that my house now has power and water, and if she needs me to also report and anchor from New Orleans, I can.

Home to bed in my now quiet apartment. The worst part of Josh and Erin leaving is they took their laptop with them. That had been my television of late and I was going to miss laying in bed and watching old reruns of "Curb Your Enthusiasm".

### **Friday, September 16,**

While I know I would soon have my little family back into our house in River Ridge, that was not the case for my co-anchor and dear friend, Karen Swensen. Their house was very close to Lake Pontchartrain, and they had 2 or 3 feet of

water. Every spare second they had away from work was spent at their house, gutting it out and pulling out wet, moldy furniture, and trying to salvage whatever they could. It was very depressing and hard on them. Not to mention, they didn't have a place to live now... It's not like you could just go rent an apartment somewhere. Most of them were damaged from the storm, and there were no managers back renting places. It was very difficult. My News Director, Sandy lost her house, and so right after the storm they purchased another house outside of Baton Rouge. Everyone was worried there just wouldn't be enough housing to go around with so many people displaced or flat out homeless now. And when Sandy and Dave bought the house, it wasn't just for them. Her parents and his parents and animals were going to live with them. You see in New Orleans, family lives very close to one another, so when Katrina wiped out neighborhoods it affected many people in the family.

Betty-Ann's brother Doug's company would not be open in New Orleans for a while, and so they moved him to Atlanta. We thought about letting Karen and John stay in Doug's house, but that's where we were going to put Betty-Ann's mom, who flooded as well. We offered to let Karen and John come live with us, and she said they were very grateful and might just do it. We would have to wait and see.

Work is all about when the areas around New Orleans would be opening up. I anchored all the shows again, which meant from 1pm to 3pm, 5pm to 5:30pm, 6:00pm to 7:00pm and 10:00pm to 10:30pm. Jefferson Parish officials say the entire parish should be open by the weekend, and that is good news for many people. Though, on the other hand, I have this vision of them bulldozing entire sections of town like New Orleans East, the 9th Ward and Lakeview. That's hard to even think about. God there is so much ahead of us. After the 10:00pm show, I rush home and throw stuff in the car to head to Jackson. This has been my routine now every chance I get. I arrive in Jackson around 1:00 am and go right to sleep.

## Saturday, September 17th

We would spend the day with the family and decided the best thing to do was to get the kids out of the hotel for a while. Living in such cramped quarters for such a long time was wearing on everyone. We decide to take them to one of those go-kart parks. This one also had an ice skating rink next to it, so we did that as well.

Now, the last time I ice skated was as a kid, but I thought I could still do it. Allison and Katie had never been on ice skates before, and it is not easy. They both had a great time though, just seeing the ice and being out there. It was really neat to spend the day with them and to try something different. Katie and Allison also loved the go-karts. It was a little loud for Katie but she did alright, and we had a great time.

When we got back to the hotel, the girls went swimming and we cooked out by the pool. The weather had been very hot and dry. We hadn't had rain that I can remember since the storm. And man was that nice. I mean, normally we get rain everyday in some fashion, but now we were in a drought of sorts. Pretty wild since we just had a hurricane. But we really needed the time to drain the city of water and get things cleaned up. Nobody seemed to care how hot it was as long as it was dry.

A calm evening spent drinking wine and sitting in room watching TV.

## Sunday, September 18th

When I wake up Sunday morning, I realize my eating has gotten out of control, and I haven't had any exercise since the storm. I normally run on the treadmill at home three or four days a week, but lately all I've been doing is eating... I decide I'm going to go for a run/walk to start the day. I don't really know where I'm going, but I head out of the hotel. Well I got lost, and my little walk ended up being like 5 miles. I was beat but I needed it.

We decide to take the girls to the mall to buy some shoes, both of them need them. It was nice and normal and we had lunch in the mall, which the girls always like. It also helped kill most of the day keeping them out of the hotel room. By the time we got back it was time for our traditional afternoon swim and cookout. There was a bunch of Red Cross workers around the pool that night, cooking food for hurricane evacuees. They said they were actually bored, as they had all this food for hurricane evacuees and no one to give the food to. Most people in Jackson were like us, and self sufficient. So, much of the food went to waste. It seemed so wasteful to have all this food being served to people in Jackson when 3 hours to the south there were so many people who desperately needed the food and provisions so much more.

Betty-Ann and I start making plans to bring the family home, maybe by the end of next week. That would give us a week to get things back to normal before the girls start school. Allison's St. Matthew Catholic school was planning on being back open on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, so we figured we could get the girls home around the 24th or 25th and be alright, even though there would be nothing for them to do. Betty-Ann was so excited, as she could now see the light at the end of the tunnel. Their hotel trip was almost over. She was so excited that she started giving me things to take home in my car to open up more space in her car when they left. We spent the night in the hotel room, and it was kind of sad for me as I knew I would be going to work again tomorrow and back to the real world that didn't include swimming and cookouts.

### **Monday, September 19th**

We all get up early as Allison has school and I wanted to take her before leaving for Baton Rouge. Allison was being good about it, but I could tell she was not looking forward to it. It was really harder on me than her, because watching her walk into school I knew I wouldn't see her for 5 or 6 days. This routine was getting old, but we were so much better off than others. After we

dropped off Allison, I could hear it in Betty-Ann's voice how much she was looking forward to having everyone back in the house again, together. That happiness was dulled a little bit that morning when on the radio we started hearing reports about Hurricane Rita, another hurricane that is expected to enter the Gulf of Mexico. We sat there in silence at first, as we just couldn't believe it. Another storm. It was early, but the weathercasters were saying it could head towards Louisiana, maybe the Morgan City area, which is only a couple of hours from New Orleans. Our city could not survive another storm. I mean nothing, not a tropical storm, not a strong wind right now. The report says it could grow to a Category Three storm. More bad news. I'm supposed to anchor the 5pm, 6pm and 10pm news that day, but I get a call to come in early, as Hurricane Rita has ramped our coverage. We were going to extend our coverage to 1:00 o'clock to 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, then do an hour at 6:00 o'clock and another hour at 10:00 o'clock.

When I arrive at the station, it's like walking into a funeral. The mood was totally different. Everyone has this blank stare on their faces, like they truly can't believe we're now talking about another storm headed towards Louisiana or Texas. The city of New Orleans was going to start letting its residents come back into the city this week, but not now. Mayor Nagin holds a press conference and rescinds all of the re-entry plans. People are in shock. They've waited so long to come and check out their flooded houses, and now another storm is keeping them from doing it. I can't imagine what they're going through. The Mayor says if the storm nears, there will have to be mandatory evacuations of both the Eastbank and the Westbank. For some people in the Algiers area, Monday was the day they were allowed back, and now the Mayor was telling them to leave.

When I get a break, I call Betty-Ann on the phone, and she is totally depressed. For the first time since the storm, I can hear the sound of defeat in her voice. She knows the area will not withstand another storm on top of Katrina. She was so much looking forward to coming home, and now all of that is up in the air. I

feel so bad for her, but there's nothing I can do. We decide we won't tell the girls about the new storm.

Our coverage centers both on the recovery efforts and on Hurricane Rita's track. The storm is not, at this point, supposed to turn to the north and affect us, but it's early and everyone has to be prepared. We won't be out of the woods until later in the week. But with the storm surge Louisiana will feel some effects from the storm, regardless.

I'm anchoring the 6:00 o'clock to 7:00 o'clock hour with Angela Hill, and in my ear I hear a producer say..."the channel 26 transmitter is down and we're going to be switching our coverage to the Saints and Giants game." I was like, what? The Saints were playing a game on Monday night football in New York, and the ABC affiliate in town was having trouble, so they asked us to broadcast the game. Man this was a wild time. Imagine calling a competitor and asking to air a Saints game that will have a lot of people watching. We of course said yes, and seconds after hearing that in my ear, Angela and I toss to the game. Monday Night Football on Channel 4. It all happened in seconds. Saints lose to the Giants.

### Tuesday, September 20th

I need to get some more food for the house, so I head out early to get some provisions. Just your basics; eggs, sausage and laundry detergent. The apartment complex we're staying in has a little workout room, and I decide it's time to hit it, for all the stress eating has caught up with me. I get a nice workout in before it's time to go into work. I'm supposed to anchor from 1:00pm to 4:30pm so I head into work a little early and arrive around 11:45am.

There's another big press conference about getting people evacuated for Rita. One of the military leaders helping with the flood has been pissing on the media of late. We know we will need busses to evacuate the people that are still here,

and when we ask him where the busses will be going, he says quote, "that's none of your business".

Rita is now a category 2 storm in the Gulf of Mexico, and Channel 4 is preparing a plan to cover the storm should it turn north. Our plan is to stage a helicopter close to the city so we can get in the air as soon as the storm passes to get some aerial shots. The storm is expected to drift west into Texas, but Louisiana's concern is that we would still get a lot of rain and maybe storm surge. We know the levees couldn't handle anything right now. That blank stare that we all saw in the days before Katrina is now back in the newsroom. It truly is hard to believe.

Betty-Ann and the kids are still planning on coming home this weekend, but everything is up in the air. I think they're planning on coming home just to stay positive and keep busy.

I spend some off time calling credit card companies, explaining that we've received no mail in the last three weeks, so I haven't received the bill to send back in. They say everything is fine and everyone's fine through September, and not to worry about it. When have you heard a credit card company say that? This *must* be a bad storm. But when I call one company to tell them, they reel off some charges that I'm not aware of. It seems that through all of this, we've been the victims of identification fraud. After I got off of the phone with them, I just sat there in disbelief knowing I was going to have to deal with this, and *now*. I spend the rest of the night contacting the companies that charged us, explaining to them we did not make the charges. The credit card company says it will take months to figure out. I tell Betty-Ann not to use one of our cards for awhile. Though as pissed as I was about the identification fraud, I can't worry about it too much as Rita now has our attention.

### Wednesday, September 21

Normally I would wake up and turn on the TV to get the latest on the hurricane Rita, but we have no TV or cable so I get the latest on my clock radio. That was

a little strange. When I went to bed Rita was a menacing Category 2 storm but now she's a Category 4 monster. From a 2 to a 4 overnight. It just keeps getting worse.

I immediately call Betty-Ann and tell her it may be best if they stay put in Jackson and see what Rita does. I'm going to be working over the weekend anyway covering the storm, so she would be home by herself and the house is not in any shape for her to be there by herself with the kids. Home is still very screwed up. There is very little police out there, and it's not a safe place to be. The bad guys know just about everyone isn't home so what better place to be to rob people's homes. Betty-Ann wasn't too upset about it. She understood the situation.

I've been in Baton Rouge anchoring several shifts a day, like 6 or 7 hours a day just anchoring but I haven't spent too much time in New Orleans, so it feels kind of weird like I'm not covering the story. I liked it much better when I would go to New Orleans in the morning, and then come back and anchor at night. It was a long day, but at least I had a true sense of what it felt and looked like down there.

At work everything is about Rita. Our News Director Sandy is trying to figure out where to put crews if we get the amount of rain we could get from Rita. And right now they're talking in the 11 to 12 inch range. The levees can't take much of anything. Even a 3 or 4 foot storm surge could pose a huge problem to our beaten levees. It's weird to watch the national coverage of Rita. There are mandatory evacuations all along the Texas Gulf Coast.

Rita is now a Category 5 storm. She looks just as big as Katrina. The newsroom is silent.

But what we're watching is the video coming out of Texas where thousands of people are trying to leave before the storm arrives. After what they saw in Louisiana, no Texan wants to ride out anything right now. Cars are backed up forever.

FEMA says it has 400 doctors and nurses and 250 mobile hospital beds ready to go, and hundreds of trucks loaded with ice and water stationed and ready to bring to the area. I was thinking, where was all this effort in the days leading up to Katrina? Other areas would be much better prepared in the years to come because of what New Orleans went through.

I watched an interview on CNN with someone from the Texas National Guard. I don't remember an interview with the *Louisiana* National Guard 3 days before the storm arrived, and Katrina was a Category 5 just like Rita. I watch busses line up in Galveston to take people to safety. New Orleans staged its buses in an area below sea level, and they flooded, not to mention there were no drivers to evacuate people. Busses, I'm sure, will be a huge part of any New Orleans evacuation in the future.

At a press conference today, the City of New Orleans says about 500 buses will be ready at the Convention Center to evacuate people. That's great, but everybody's gone. You're evacuating a city that's basically empty, not to mention that most people who did come back after the storm, have cars and they're not relying on busses now. The city says it had 500 ready but only two busses left with people. I don't fault the plan to have busses ready for an empty city, who knows, but I just wish they could have been around on August 27th and 28th *before Katrina*.

The death toll was raised today to 799 in Louisiana and over 1000 on the Gulf Coast. Far below what was anticipated but still very sad. The police and the National Guard were going door to door in boats, looking for the dead. They called it an initial sweep, and they only went in doors that were open. Now they say they are going to start knocking down doors to see if anyone is inside and they're going to start in the hardest hit areas. There is a feeling a significant number of bodies will now be found.

I anchor a long day of 1pm-3pm, 5pm, 6pm-7pm and 10pm-11pm. I spent the afternoon again on the phone with 2 companies that said hundreds of dollars of stuff was charged to my credit card. They've all been very nice, but there is so

much else going on, I just don't have the time or the emotional strength to deal with it. We've cancelled the account so no more harm can be done, and I'll deal with the mess later on. I know I'm not paying it, so whatever.

I work on a story about police officers and first responders getting scammed by 2 men pretending to be working with the Salvation Army. 2500 policemen, EMS, and first responders signed up to get 5 thousand dollars worth of food and clothes vouchers for their hard work and bravery during the storm. They gave the scammers their names, phone numbers and addresses. But when the first responders showed up to get their money, the two men were long gone. Luckily we found out the men were arrested later in Green Bay. The Attorney General's office believes the two men were going to use the information to get FEMA or Red Cross money.

When I talked to the girls that night on the phone, I heard some good news from Allison. I was so worried about her going to a new school and not knowing anyone...well she loved it. She says she made some friends and that she doesn't want to leave. I know she doesn't mean it. She does make friends so easily. I was so proud of her. It wasn't that easy walking into that situation as "the girl displaced by the storm", but she did great. Katie too did great as well.

### Thursday, September 22

Rita is still a Category 5 storm, but I woke up feeling OK about the situation. I don't know why. Betty-Ann calls and asks what they should do. Should they come home or not? At this point I'm thinking we'll get wind and rain but the bulk of the storm remains to the south and west. I believe most of the problem will be in St. Bernard where the levees have huge holes. I can hear in her voice how hard at times it's been living in one room with 2 young kids and her mother. We had it better than most people, but it's still difficult for her to do everything as a single parent.

After I get off the phone, I find out the storm has moved to the east and north and again everything changes. When I get to work at 11:00 o'clock, the wheels are in motion and the station is in full preparation. I tell Sandy if she wants me to go west and cover the story, I can. The storm's going to hit over the weekend, and Betty-Ann and the girls are likely going to stay in Jackson, so I'd just as soon cover the storm as sit on the anchor desk. She says we'll see.

When I start anchoring at 1:00 o'clock, Louisiana has already called for mandatory evacuations in many parishes in southwest Louisiana. Governor Blanco has declared a state of emergency. Now that the storm has moved, they're calling for the Baton Rouge area to feel more of the storm. They are talking about 10 inches of rain and a storm surge of 3 to 5 feet of storm surge in New Orleans. The pumps in New Orleans that pump out the water during a storm are not working, nor is there anyone there to work them. It appears there will be more flooding in New Orleans. We can't believe we are about to go through this again. Another Category 5 storm, and now it's possible it's going to have a Louisiana landfall. One of our weather guys says it's looking like a Lake Charles landfall, which would put us on the eastern, stronger side of the storm.

I call Betty-Ann and now she really doesn't know what to do. She says she watched the Mayor's press conference and he said only a little bit of rain and weak storm surge. Then I call her and tell her she better not come home because of the wind and possible flooding.

Right now New Orleans is under a tropical storm warning, and here in Baton Rouge, we are expecting Hurricane force winds in a couple of days. You talk about a surreal situation. Betty-Ann doesn't know what she'll do. People walk around the station literally cussing under their breath. When we finish the 6:00 o'clock to 7:00 o'clock show, there is another station meeting. We have had several of these in the past month, and they all have such a somber tone. The news is as expected. We will start our around the clock coverage at 5:00am tomorrow morning, and continue until the storm makes landfall. We are now going around the clock with storm coverage for the second time in a month. It's

unbelievable. We dispatch crews to all parts of the city and areas south of the city in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. It's like Rita is going to hit the areas around New Orleans that Katrina spared. It's hard at this point not to think of these storms as people. There seems to be a lot more anger with this storm. We are told to bring sleeping bags and clothes to survive three days. Whatever. Karen Swensen and I will anchor from 9:00pm to 5:00am the next day. We didn't know what to expect about the shift. It was going to be overnight, but that was when Rita was supposed to hit. But who would be watching? And an 8 hour anchor shift is long. Usually, in this overnight situation, the station will let the field reporters get some sleep because we need them fresh for daylight. I totally understand that, but it's tough on the anchor's who'll anchor for 8 hours without having reporters in the field to talk to. Each anchor team will work in 8 hour shifts. The strange part is, when we get off the air at 5:00am, the storm could be landing. We'll want to head right out and cover it. It looks like it's going to be another long few days.

I'm worried about my house again. We were so lucky before, but we have several huge oak trees in the backyard. A few came down during Katrina but away from the house. I don't know if the trees can take another storm.

I haven't talked to my parents too much this week because I know I'll only worry them more.

My parents called Betty-Ann tonight, and she tried to alleviate their fears. I found out my mom has to have another carotid artery surgery. Her second one since Katrina. She didn't even tell me about the first surgery, because she didn't want to worry me. I was supposed to be on vacation this week that included a flight to Gainesville, Virginia to see them. A trip, of course, that did not happen. The flight was canceled weeks ago. Everything is up in the air. I have like 4 weeks of vacation time left this year that will likely go unused. Who cares? People have lost everything and New Orleans is hanging on by a thread. I go to bed wondering how our city will fare. Will this be the knockout punch?

## Friday, September 23

I woke up to the news that water was pouring into parts of the city in the lower 9th ward. The Army Corps of Engineers had not repaired the levee along the industrial canal, and the water level in the lake was getting higher because of Hurricane Rita well to our south. She wasn't any where close to us, yet we were feeling her effects because of all the damaged levees. The Army Corps of Engineers says this is their worst case scenario. Water was just gushing through the hole in the levee and filling up an area that was just recently dry. On a much smaller scale, it gave us a vision of what it was like when the levees broke on August 29th. It was tough to watch the area get flooded. The water kept flowing to the south and started to flood the St. Bernard area again, and they were pissed that nothing had been done to address the levee since Katrina.

Talked to Betty-Ann and they still don't know what they're doing. I tell her, why leave a safe place in Jackson and come to an unknown in River Ridge? River Ridge might be fine, but it might not. It depends on how close Rita gets to us. I tell her, why not just wait until Saturday and then we'll know a lot more. Again, there was a lot of tension in her voice. A month in that hotel had worn her out. She did a great job though, and it made it a lot easier on me, knowing she and the girls were being taken care of.

In our apartment, we didn't have cable TV or a telephone, so sitting around there looking at the walls wasn't an option. Karen's husband John had already left for New Orleans and his work, so Karen and I decided the best place to get information was work, so we left early and went in to the station. Karen had her two year old daughter Catherine with her. The child is amazing. She went to the station and hung out for 7 hours, then went to sleep in the computer room at 8:00 with lights on and people working. She stayed asleep until the next morning around 9:00 o'clock. When I got off the air at 5:00am, she was sleeping with our News Director Sandy Breland.

Karen and I got to the station around 12:30pm and we didn't go on the air until 9:00 o'clock that night, for our 8 hour anchor shift. It was going to be a long day. We watched the storm drift closer to the northeast all day. I wasn't worried where we were in Baton Rouge, but it was looking like Louisiana could get hit again. We spent the day wondering if Rita would take care of the areas not hit by Katrina. Could Louisiana really withstand a one-two punch like that? We talked about the loss of the oil and gas industry and the fishing industry. All of the networks have been showing the levee break in New Orleans with the water pouring into the 9th ward and St. Bernard Parish. These areas were getting flooded for the second time in three weeks.

By the time Karen and I started anchoring at 9:00 o'clock, parts of Louisiana were starting to feel the effects of Rita. The storm wasn't supposed to make landfall until 6 or 7 Saturday morning, but it seems hurricanes always come a little sooner than expected, and they always seem to be a little east of where they're supposed to go.

### Saturday, September 24th

It was, as expected, a long night of anchoring. We spent the final hour talking exclusively with meteorologist, Brad Panovich. It was like a weather seminar talking about hurricanes. I don't know who was watching, but it was very educational for me. We had reporter Jonathan Betz in the eye of the storm in Lake Charles, Louisiana, but we couldn't do satellite shots during the bad weather, so he kept us up to date by telephone. All of our anchors, reporters and photographers have all done such a great job under enormous pressure.

When Karen and I got off the air after 8 hours at 5:00 in the morning, we were beat. She went to go find Catherine and I grabbed my sleeping bag and found a little spot near the elevators at the station to try and sleep. But it was pretty bright in the hallway, so I pulled the covers all the way over my head and fell asleep around 5:30am. There was a lot of noise around the station, and some

people were now waking up for their shift so sleeping a long time wasn't going to happen. Around 8:30am, I woke up and literally dragged myself downstairs into the newsroom. Sandy and Chris were laying out the day ahead, deciding where to send the crews to look for damage. Because Rita had hit overnight, the damage was just now becoming apparent. Rita hit hard in the Lake Charles area but while bad, she did less damage than people predicted. But now parts of our viewing area were getting hit with the storm surge and rising waters. We were getting calls about high water in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. Just as it had been after Hurricane Lili in 2002, the levees in parts of Terrebonne Parish failed and water was pouring in there. Rescue efforts were underway there, and I couldn't believe what the state was going through again. The fishing industry was getting slammed. The oyster beds to the east took a hit from Katrina, and now the industry west of the city was getting it. A little to our west in Abbeville, we were getting calls about people needing to be rescued from their roofs.

With the first cup of coffee setting in, I was off to Morgan City to see if that city had any damage. We didn't think it would be much, but we figured we should check it out. Morgan City is a lot like New Orleans, geographically. It is surrounded by a levee system, and there is river running through the city and a large lake just to the north of the city. Their worst case scenario sounds a lot like New Orleans'. We spent the day in Morgan City, but they really didn't get hit too hard. Lots of downed trees and power lines. They considered themselves lucky.

Betty-Ann and the family decided to come home on Saturday from Jackson. They were thrilled to be leaving the hotel. They said they ran into some bad weather on the trip, but nothing was going to make them stop. They went to Jackson with clothes and supplies for a few days and stayed nearly a month.

The station decided that with Rita inland, we could start putting some people back at the station during our coverage. Dennis Woltering had been doing it for the past week. He would do stories and then anchor part of the newscast from our parking lot in the French Quarter. Our building was still empty, but at least

we had a daily presence from our station. The French Quarter still didn't have power, so we did everything out of our satellite truck and generators.

I volunteered to work at the station, as it would allow me to live at home. I especially wanted this with the girls now home. Sandy agreed, and so after the news on Saturday night August 24th I would be going home. Karen would stay in the apartment because, sadly, she didn't have a home to go home to. They had been gutting it out every chance they had, but it was nowhere near livable, especially with a 2 year old.

I had been working nearly around the clock for two days on only 3 hours of sleep, but now I was going home. I had a lot of energy. I did my story on Morgan City and Karen and I anchored the newscast Saturday night. It was all Rita. After the show, I had to go to the apartment to grab what little stuff I had. I said goodbye to our little apartment for the last time and headed home. The apartment was actually very nice and man, many people had it much worse than I. But now I wanted to go home and see my family. I didn't get on the road until 11:30 at night, and didn't pull up at the house until close to 1:00 in the morning. I crawled into bed with Betty-Ann with a great sense of comfort, knowing my family was back in the house together.

### Sunday, September 25th

When we woke up the girls crawled into bed with us and we just sat there getting used to each other again. Man that was a great feeling. There road ahead was not going to be easy, we knew that, but we were all together again.

After we got up, I had to get one of our refrigerators out of our garage and get it ready again. My brother-in-law, Mike, had cleaned them out a few days after the storm and since then, they had been in the garage. One of them was a goner and too far gone to save. It was old to begin with, and we used it as our secondary refrigerator. I cleaned out our big one and pushed it up the driveway

and back into the kitchen. I was more than pleased when it started right up after plugging it in.

Then I went to the grocery store to get supplies. What an adventure that turned out to be. The store was only open for a few hours a day as it had only a few employees. And since there were very few people back, there was virtually nothing in the store. There was no milk or eggs, and very little else. It was really weird seeing this huge store that we shop at all the time have very little on the shelves. This is going to be the way things are for awhile. Nothing's open and the places that are open will have few employees. I picked up what I could pick up and headed home. When I got home I changed clothes and stood at my back door and surveyed the situation. I had to remove some huge tree limbs from the backyard, but today was the day...I was going to mow my grass.