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## **Katrina: The Storm – The Aftermath**

**Elizabeth M. Doolittle**

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Katrina, the most horrendous hurricane to strike the Gulf Coast affected lives, communities, and business, everything in its path. The impact of the hurricane was strongest on Monday August 29, 2005 when it came ashore at Bay St. Louis, MS. The enormous eye of the storm actually struck several communities including Waveland and Pass Christian. Gulfport and Biloxi suffered the effect of the tremendous winds surrounding the eye. Both the preparation for and the aftermath of the storm produced widespread disruption to lives and activities throughout a large part of the Gulf Coast region.

The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Park Campus began preparation for Katrina on Saturday August 27, 2005 with a call to all faculty and staff to come to the campus to secure their offices. Word was that the campus would be closed from after classes on Saturday through the day on Monday. It was expected that the Library would be closed for one and a half days. After all, this was all that was necessary for the previous evacuation in late July when hurricane Dennis passed through. Later, as the hurricane neared the Coast, the return time was extended until Tuesday. The closer the storm came the longer the extension until finally the return time was set for when “further notice” would be given.

Librarians and paraprofessionals arrived at the Gulf Coast Library on the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Park mid-morning on Saturday. Items were removed from desktops and counters; computers were shut down, turned off, unplugged and moved off the floors. All loose items were moved into cabinets or storerooms. The Library still opened for regular hours that Saturday from 2:00 P.M. till 6:00 P.M. with minimum services available. Staff was briefed on extra precautions to implement at closing.

Most Gulf Coast residents evacuated the coast Saturday afternoon or, as I did, Sunday morning. This storm was too big to stay. I made my way to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, home of the main campus of The University of Southern Mississippi. What a shock it was to discover on Monday August 29, 2005 that the wind from hurricane Katrina was as dangerous seventy miles inland as it was on the coast. The damage in Hattiesburg was just different. The coast dealt with a storm surge of up to thirty feet and winds of one hundred seventy-five miles per hour and more. Inland at Hattiesburg the wind damage was from winds up to one hundred fifty miles per hour. Throughout the storm, I sat in an inner hallway of a friend’s home. We sat huddled with our only contact a six inch battery operated TV. We tensed with each loud crack waiting for the thud that would tell us where the tree had fallen. Over two dozen trees fell around the house that day. The worry was the worst. Who else out there had survived? Family, friends, business associates, even the neighbors were cut off from contact. The power was off, water was off, and there was no phone service.

An assessment after the hurricane showed large trees cracked or just uprooted from the ground. We were spared; trees missed the house by inches. The driveway had four large trees across it, we could not get out. But then, where would we go? Once we could get out the driveway to drive around we discovered that the whole area had suffered the same or worse destruction than we initially saw in this one yard.

Several days after Katrina hit, we moved to another location that had a generator available to provide electricity and an Internet connection. At that point it was possible to check the University email to find out how things were going on the coast. The story was not good. Meetings were

scheduled and faculty, staff, and administrators gathered in the parking lot of Long Beach High School. People spoke from the back of a pickup truck, organizing, planning, and gathering information about people, conditions and living arrangements. Finding employees places to live was a priority to the University. Without a place to stay employees could not come back to work.



[Figure 1] *Dr. Pat Smith addresses faculty and staff in the parking lot at the Long Beach High School.*

The powerful water surge from Hurricane Katrina rolled inland anywhere from two to five blocks, about to where the CXS railroad track runs. Because Gulf Park campus is located south of this railroad track it was not accessible for several weeks. Search and Rescue were scouring the area for survivors, surveyors were checking structures for safety, and health agencies were studying debris and residue for contaminants. Concertina wire ran the length of the track and each crossing had a guard station with at least two army National Guardsmen on duty. Only vehicles with passes were allowed to pass the guards and cross the tracks.

Finally, when University officials were able to access the damage we received word that the devastation was extensive and that we could not return to campus for some time. The University owned a section of the old Columbia Garden Park Hospital and had been planning renovations before the hurricane. Renovations accelerated and the entire Gulf Park operation moved into the temporary facility.

The Library was assigned four rooms off of one of the middle hallways and immediately began to set up operations. While all employees were advised to return to work by September 26, 2005, several Library employees returned earlier.

When classes began for Fall semester the Library was ready to offer all library services. We were quite proud of our efforts and the students certainly appreciated them. We did away with all charges, fines, charges for items lost to Katrina, printing and copying charges, and the standard processing charge for checking out a laptop. Students adjusted well to dealing with us in a space smaller than just one floor of our beautiful three year old Library.

During set up at the Gulf Coast Student Service Center, as the new facility was named, Library staff made several trips to the Gulf Coast Library. A door had been forced open by the storm surge and about two feet of water covered the first floor. By the time we returned the water was gone but the mud was still there and the mold had started to take hold.



[Figure 2] *Mold growing on microfilm boxes.*

Staff went into the Gulf Coast Library and salvaged whatever they could from the first floor moving many of the materials to the second floor. It was hard work. There was no air and the temperature was in the high nineties with no rain to relieve the dry hot conditions. The drought that followed the storm created serious problems, one of which was the inability to burn debris. A “No Burn” ban was in effect for several months and hindered clean up efforts. The drought increased already difficult conditions because it limited

what could be done with the massive amount of debris and also because there was no relief from summer temperatures that consistently topped ninety degrees. At the Library offices were inspected, boxes packed, tagged, and moved to the second floor via the stairs since there was no electricity for the elevator. Most staff spent two or three days cleaning items out of their work area. What could be used at the Gulf Coast Student Service Center Library was marked for Physical Plant to transport over to GCSSC.

The main library collections are housed on the second and third floor and were not damaged by hurricane Katrina. Dehumidifiers were moved into the building and a generator set up to power them and the air conditioning. The collections are being carefully monitored for mold. So far very few items in these collections have been identified for disposal. Materials lost were fairly well limited to the first floor periodicals collection, both the paper and the microforms, and items on the floor in the Collection Management Office.

The effort of salvaging materials from the first floor of the Gulf Coast Library was draining. Still, full days were put in at the Gulf Coast Student Service Center Library as well. Reserve items which were identified as being mold free were the first items moved to GCSSC Library. Office supplies that were dry and free of mold were badly needed and were moved to the temporary location also. We started operations at the GCSSC with a few tables, chairs and computers.



[Figure 3] *Circulation Desk at Gulf Coast Student Services Center.*

Meanwhile, staff scoured the old hospital for any pieces of furniture that could be used. The GCSSC Library opened with only a table for a Circulation Desk. Staff found a nursing station desk with two matching cabinets and a bookcase that was moved into the GCSSC Library's main room. Wow, what a find these cabinets and desk was for us. We now have a Circulation Desk that almost looks like a circulation desk.

We were able to scrounge a couple of file cabinets and some metal shelving to move into the GCSSC Library. That was followed by a couple of small shelving units and a two small cabinets. Since most of the staff are located in the one fair size room in our hallway, furniture and supplies are shared. Staff, unfortunately still have only tables for desk. These are very narrow and do not have drawers for supplies or files but we are making do. Five staff members work in very tight quarters, which sometimes elevate the stress levels.

We started at GCSSC with a hallway lined with tables and laptops. These were not always easy to use for students who were not familiar with the mouse pad. We have since replaced the laptops with desktop computers. Internet connections have gone from wireless to network cable making it more reliable. The students have been very supportive and frequently express appreciation for the efforts we have put forth. Faculty also seems pleased with our efforts.



[Figure 4] *Students working in the hallway at Gulf Coast Student Services Center.*

A courier runs over to the Gulf Coast Library each day Monday through Friday to retrieve materials the students request making the library

collections available for checkout. Campus to campus transfer and Interlibrary Loan services were up and running when we opened here.

Operations are up and running with all services originally offered at the Gulf Coast Library, with a few additions, being offered at the GCSSC Library. The people on the Gulf Coast are still dealing with their losses and the stress of such a catastrophic event. Students have been gracious and have gratefully accepted the new library setting. Most comments, on Comments Cards and the recent LibQual+ Survey were very positive.

Staff has continued to struggle with their life altering situations. Stress along with the close proximity in which we work, have been hardships for the staff to overcome. Absenteeism has increased. More people are sick more often. But everyone keeps trying. The length of time for a decision by the Institute of Higher Learning (The Mississippi Board of Education) on whether the university will rebuild and return to the Gulf Park campus, or whether the university will move to a new location weighed heavily on staff. Morale sometimes slips but staff seems to take turns trying to boost each other up. Overall the guiding principle is always good service to the library patrons. This drives our days.

In addition to bringing back library services to the students at the main Gulf Park campus the library initiated services to the students at the Jackson County Teaching Site. The JC Teaching Site is located in Ocean Springs, MS and provides classes to students living in that area. Following the storm this facility became even more important and having a library at that site meets SACS recommendations for distance education guidelines. Many students could not travel to the GCSSC for their classes, especially since the bridge between Ocean Springs and Biloxi was destroyed by Katrina. So classes went to the students and library services followed the classes. The satellite library opened in what was the old bookstore, giving us the advantage of shelves already in place and a counter which was converted to a circulation desk. Now we offer the same services at the JC site as those at our other facility. A shuttle service moves items between locations on a regular basis.

Our biggest need now is still space. We are crammed into a very small area with staff working on top of each other and students working in the hallway making coming and going difficult. However, this problem is not unique to the GCSSC Library. Classroom space is at a minimum, many faculty are still without office space, and there have only recently been trailers set up out back for additional classroom space.

Some decisions have now been reached about the return to the Gulf Park Campus. One classroom complex is now open, Physical Plant is completely operational in their former facility and the main classroom building is under restoration. The Library is scheduled to return to their facility in October of 2007. The first floor of the Gulf Coast Library has been gutted, walls have been removed, and insulation is gone, as is carpeting and furniture. It looks deserted. But work has begun on the roof and the leaking windows on the second floor have been repaired so we do see some progress.



[Figure 5] *Gutted first floor of the Gulf Coast Library at USM Gulf Park Campus.*

However, since most faculty and administrative functions are to remain at the GCSSC for now and only classroom space will be available at the Gulf Park campus for some time to come, the Library will also retain a presence here. There is still so much to do and a long way to go almost two years after The Storm. We still work hard to remain positive and to move forward. Through all of our challenges our goals remain the same, to meet the educational needs of the students at The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Park.