

Frank McBride: Covering Katrina from New Orleans to Houston

Frank McBride went to San Jacinto College and received his degree in radio, television, and film from the University of Houston in 1988. Houston's KHOU-TV, Channel 11, sent him to cover Hurricane Katrina with reporter Janice Williamson because of McBride's previous experience working in New Orleans. On their return, he covered the shelters at both the Astrodome and the George R. Brown Convention Center. His story sets the stage for understanding the trauma the people from New Orleans had faced before they arrived in Houston. Ernesto Valdés interviewed Frank McBride on June 16, 2006.



When the levees broke and the flooding began, Frank McBride and Janice Williamson of Channel 11 accompanied Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries boats to help rescue people in New Orleans from their rooftops and attics. Photo courtesy of NOAA.

FRANK McBRIDE (FM): When we were driving out, Janice and I were listening to WWL on AM radio out of New Orleans, and they were doing their, “everyone needs to evacuate” . . . Having worked there, I was kind of discounting the seriousness in their warnings. I was talking to Janice, saying, “You know, the whole time I was there, it was always ‘this is the big one’ any time a storm came.” I was saying, “But it is their job. They have to make people aware that there is a danger. It is probably not going to be as big a deal as they are making it sound like.” I think back on that now, and . . . I think it is very ironic. I was thinking that they were overstating the seriousness of it. Now, I think it was appropriate, if not maybe less than it really was.

The reports we were hearing from New Orleans were a little more severe but didn't sound like they had been hit terribly hard. . . . Our plan was to go and see how far we could get. We headed out Interstate 10.

As we got to where the Huey P. Long Bridge feeds into River Road, . . . we encountered a convoy, and it was mostly [Louisiana Department of] Wildlife and Fisheries boats being pulled by trucks and pick-ups and all their different equipment. . . . We joined in with this convoy and followed them in. . . . We were able to accompany one of the relief efforts. There were people all around this area that were standing on the roofs, some

of them by themselves, some of them in groups. [They got] as many people as they could get into the boat, asked them where [there were] other people they knew needed rescuing. They were trying to keep records of all these things. It was really hard for them to keep track of who had been rescued. The thing that really struck me was, shortly after they would launch, they would find people immediately, and the boat would fill up, and they would have to return and let them out.

They would try to remember where people had been before that they weren't able to pick up, or that they had been told needed rescuing. Each time they went out, maybe they went a little bit further, but they weren't going very far, just maybe one-quarter of a mile and then back. It was obvious that the problem extended way beyond, several miles. You couldn't even see where the end of the problem was, houses upon houses in the distance. You start doing the math in your head. If they can only go this short distance before the boat is full and then they return, how long is it going to be before the people that were several miles out get any attention or any help? . . . You could hear people who had gone up into their attics whenever the water was rising on them and had no way to get out.

By the time we had gotten back onto the bridge, and we were seeing the growing group of people who now were rescued from

their homes but didn't know where to go, we were feeling exhausted after just two hours. We [were] feeling dehydrated and needed some relief. At that point, it struck me: these people have been here . . . when the sun came up this morning, they were out there on their roofs, or in their attics, and the storm had caused the water to start coming up; so some of these people were heading on maybe eighteen, twenty hours in those conditions with direct exposure to the sun or the stifling heat inside their attics. The scope of the problem was really starting to hit me at that point. If I am feeling this badly after just two hours riding on a boat, how are these people feeling standing, stranded on their roofs? . . .

We went over into the Superdome area, and there were large numbers of ambulance and emergency personnel staged underneath the elevated freeway right beside the Superdome. . . . They basically were there to help care for the people who were in and around the Superdome area who needed medical attention . . .

The [people] up on the freeway were starting to get pretty desperate at the time that we encountered then. There was no shade, they didn't have any access to water, they had young children with soiled diapers and no way to do anything about that. Things were getting pretty bad, very uncomfortable, and going from uncomfortable to dangerous.

ERNESTO VALDÉS (EV): What was your feeling about the fact that you had an ice chest full of water?

FM: It was very hard. We ended up trying to be very judicious. When we thought we could safely provide someone some help, we would. Before we went in, we had to strap gas cans to the roof of the car knowing that we might not be able to refuel. . . . In that same area by the Superdome, there was a man who had his whole family packed up in his car . . . but they had no gas. He was saying, "You got some there?" He wasn't insisting, he was just asking. I looked at the situation, didn't see that there was anyone around, like large groups that were going to rush us so, sure, I gave him a can . . . and hoped that that was going to

get him somewhere safer than here. [It was] the same with the water. There were some people that we were able to give them some, but we had to make sure that it wasn't going to set off a big reaction. . . .

The part that nagged at me the most was the immensity. When we were doing the boat rescues, just knowing how, in just the small area where we were, there were so many people, and then you multiply that out to how far the flooding was and you almost immediately come to the conclusion they can't get to all these people in time. And that hurts. It makes you feel very helpless and wonder, is there . . . some way that we can speed up this process and not let these people die a really horrible death . . . because they are exposed and no one can get to them? . . .

EV: When you covered the story in Houston, what conditions did you observe inside the Dome?

FM: I was very impressed at how organized it was. You know, they had set everyone up in rows. There was obviously a lot of trouble getting people together but as far as giving them places, there didn't seem to be any conflict among the people saying, "I don't have a space." . . . They had a system for how they got their meals. . . . They had rooms full of computers set up for them to come in and try to get their names on databases so family and friends, whoever was trying to contact them, could. Constantly overhead on the speakers, you would hear PA announcements—people's names, trying to find family members, trying to find people that they had lost. . . .

You couldn't count the number of [volunteers] that were out there. They weren't just willing; they were [saying,] "Please, let me help. Let me do something." Whenever they saw the need, they dropped everything and they got themselves out there because there is no way that that operation could have worked without the people who made themselves available to do whatever was needed. It was good to see our city rise up for something like that. 🍷

Frank McBride commented on how organized the Houston shelters were—from the cot set up to the meal service. Photo courtesy of Mark Sloan.

