

Hope and Sorrow: Notes from the Dome Floor

Many interviews in this issue included heart-rending stories of the interviewees' personal encounters with our "guest citizens." Here are a few of those stories.



On a wall inside the Dome, evacuees posted names of missing family and friends they hoped to find.

When I went into the Dome the first time . . . walking down, the opening out onto the floor of the Dome. . . . I remember the narrator on the film clip of the crash of the Hindenburg, and he says, "Oh, the humanity." That was what rang through the back of my head. I saw all these cots covering the floor of the Dome and a sea of people; and, you know, it wasn't loud—nobody was yelling. There was talk, normal room level talk. . . .but it was just all these folks laid out on these cots with whatever belongings they had left to them piled beside them, and families trying to group together and searching for other family members.

Dr. David Persse,
Director, Houston Fire Department EMS

When we went to the Dome, . . . "Oh my God!" It would just hit you. You are walking into the floor of the Dome alongside of people that are victims. . . . Some of them had mud up to their chest. There were little old ladies [who said], "Honey, don't get too close. I haven't had a shower in a few days." They would be embarrassed, and they would start crying and saying, "I'm so sorry. I've soiled myself." And you would say, "It is O.K. It is O.K." But their pride, everything was just right there—raw—and, they were apologizing to you.

Diana Rodriguez,
Administrative Coordinator, Houston Fire Department EMS

I think, frankly, [one of my most vivid memories was] going down to the Astrodome and seeing two guys having lunch [at a table on the Dome floor] when an entire city is coming their way, and they are worried about their ham sandwich. We are telling them that the city of New Orleans is heading their way, and they are like, "What are you smoking, boy?" And then walking away and going, "We're in heapin' big trouble now."

Rev. Eric Hystad,
Houston's Second Baptist Church

The first time I went down on the Dome floor, it was not what I expected. . . . I ran into a four or five-year-old young boy that was sitting on his cot, and I asked him if he came in last night. He said "yes," and I said, "Well, welcome to Houston." I asked him . . . "Where are your mom and dad?" He said, "My dad is getting breakfast." I said, "Fantastic. . . . I asked him again, "Where is your mom at?" He said, "Well, my dad reached for her, but she went under the water." So, the first person I . . . actually stopped and said something to was not what I anticipated in response because all of . . . the activity . . . to do something great, the first thing I heard was failure. I didn't go back on the floor for about four days. I was not prepared for that type of answer.

Mark Sloan,
Director, Citizens Corps, Homeland Security Special Projects



Here, two evacuees exchanged wedding vows in the Astrodome. Although many stories were sad, stories of hope and happiness were also told.

All photos courtesy of Mark Sloan unless otherwise noted.

Bill Cosby came to the Dome, and he was giving a talk to the crowd there and asked, "How many of y'all hate the police?" . . . His comment to them was, "Look around you." There were all of our police officers. . . . He said, "How do you feel about these guys? Do you feel safe here?" And they did . . . people did not want to leave the Dome. They felt safe, they felt connected to FEMA, they were connected to each other. And they gave them [the police] a round of applause. . . . I had a man come to me from New Orleans, from the Lower Ninth Ward, a very poor man, he said, "You know, I used to hate white people but you all are incredible."

Judge Robert Eckels,
Harris County Judge, Director Emergency
Management

One man that got off the bus . . . had a regular water bottle but the label was all torn off like he had been holding it for hours. I said, "Sir, let me have your bottle of water and here, here is a fresh, cold, clean bottle of water." He said, "Oh no, ma'am," and he about started crying. He said, "I will never, ever waste another drop of clean water again. This is precious. I'll take that bottle, but you can't have this other one."

Diana Rodriguez,
Administrative Coordinator, Houston Fire
Department EMS

Instead of separate cots, people would start to put their cots together and build little, itty, bitty privacy walls with cots turned on their flip side just to sort of say this is our little family space—these three feet by three feet, the closest thing to a little home.

Dr. Herminia Palacio,
Executive Director,
Harris County Public Health & Environmental Services



Evacuees comfort each other on the Dome floor.

[A] lady showed up with a baby and said, "I don't know who this baby belongs to. I saw him in New Orleans; I picked him up off the ground. . . . I don't know what to do with it but I couldn't leave it behind." Our nurses . . . took that kid, and they treated it like one of their own. . . . Eventually they identified who the parents were, but it took several days. But for the time that the baby was there, they had somebody there taking care of [him] 24/7 not as a nurse, perhaps, but just to be there, to hold it, to keep it company.

David Lopez,
President and CEO, Harris County Hospital District



Volunteers filled the expanse of the Astrodome with rows of cots to welcome evacuees. Diana Rodriguez commented, "It wasn't like the Dome you could ever remember."

When we had training, there was a group of nuns, and they all came in their white nun outfits . . . All of them had received a yellow [Operation Compassion] t-shirt, and . . . they thought that they had to put it on immediately. I was walking in front of them, and I heard one of the sweet ladies say, "I can't get my t-shirt over my head." She was trying to get this t-shirt over her habit. It was just all messed up. . . . and I said, "You don't have to put that on right now. . . ." About three minutes later, I turned around, and all of them were walking together [wearing] all those yellow shirts.

Rev. Eric Hystad,
Houston's Second Baptist Church

In that kind of a mass shelter, there are always rumors going around of things happening. . . . I remember a lady that came in and said six children were killed last night. Nobody was killed last night in the Astrodome. They said the body was out there, and they were hiding it. I said, "Ma'am, there is no higher authority here than me, and I will assure you there was nobody found in the south parking lot last night."

Judge Robert Eckels,
Harris County Judge,
Director Emergency Management

There was one guy from New Orleans, a big guy, maybe around 6'5", 6'6" maybe 350 pounds. He was sitting there, and he was crying. . . . We said, "Are you okay?" . . . He said, "I've had pain all my life, and I've learned to live with it, but today is the first day . . . that I don't have pain. . . . I come here, and your doctors check me out. I had dental abscesses." We even had a mobile dental unit there. They brought him in, took out the teeth that were rotten, and his pain went away.

David Lopez,
President and CEO, Harris County Hospital District

I brought my wife and daughter out to the Dome . . . My daughter decided that she wanted to bring something for the kids and had a huge collection of Barbie dolls that she had inherited . . . So she went around the floor giving out Barbie dolls to all the kids; and, to me, what epitomized the spirit of these people. . . . [was that] one of the little girls that Kirby had given her doll to save [Kirby] a little book and said, "Thank you. I want to give you something, too." It wasn't that they were just wanting to get. They wanted to give back.

Judge Robert Eckels,
Harris County Judge, Director
Emergency Management



One man who received dental work at the clinic had relief from his pain for the first time in fifteen years.
Photo courtesy of David Lopez.

A young man [who was "belligerent" about having to check in] . . . finally gave in and answered the questions, and he got his bed. . . . Two or three hours later, he came back to that same place, to those same volunteers, and he said, "I want to apologize to you" . . . He had been on his housetop for two days, had been rescued, and put on three different buses. . . . He didn't have any friends or relatives [here]. He said, "I am homeless, I have no possessions. . . . Everything I own is under water." He said, "I was sitting over there in my bed thinking, 'These people care for me. Why am I angry?' " . . . He ended up getting a place to stay here in Houston . . . getting something to drive . . . and actually got a job here in the course of one week.

Rev. Eric Hystad, Houston's Second Baptist Church

