



CloseCall

Lance Ross, '97, Former Recreational Leadership Coordinator at UW-River Falls, Shares His Personal Account of Leaving New Orleans During the Hurricane and Sending Help in the Aftermath

There are probably snakes and alligators in there and I'm going to be sitting up here when this thing hits," Lance Ross thought to himself as he peered into the bayou below from atop a long bridge span.

The 1997 UW-River Falls graduate was in the midst of a dead stop on I-10. Fifty-mile-per-hour wind gusts propelling light sheets of rain spattered his face as his mind was consumed with regret. The finger tips of hurricane Katrina were beginning to lash the thousands of travelers oozing north and west away from the city of New Orleans.

With the engine turned off to conserve fuel, Ross anxiously stood beside his rental car looking down the ribbon of vehicles hoping to catch the first glimpse of movement. He knew this was the wrong place to be during a hurricane and wished he hadn't given up his shelter in the city.

"I arrived in New Orleans on Thursday to give a presentation at the Emergency Medical Services Expo," says Ross, a veteran EMT and Regional Emergency Medical Services Coordinator for the Minnesota Metro Region. He was scheduled to give two presentations to dozens of emergency medical personnel on Friday and Saturday. The premise of the presentation was what you do in the disaster setting without adequate resources over a period of time, a foreshadowing subject for the city of 480,000 he was visiting.

Following Friday afternoon's presentation at the convention center, Ross retreated to his hotel room to

tweak his presentation. Indications were Katrina was heading toward Florida. Few in New Orleans paid attention. As Ross strolled through the hotel lobby the next morning, he overheard people speaking of a voluntary evacuation of New Orleans.

"It's still a couple of days away. I'll give my presentation this afternoon and try to get a flight out right after," he thought. His flight was originally scheduled for Sunday at 5 p.m., and the best the airline could do was to get him a flight out two hours earlier.

A greater than usual multitude of taxis were coming and going in front of his hotel as he made his way to the convention center for his Saturday afternoon presentation. The expo crowd was sparse. During his presentation, to a thinner crowd than the day before, Ross received a text message. "Dude, get out of town. Category 5," wrote a friend about the status of Katrina.

Upon returning to the hotel following his presentation, taxi cabs, like honeybees swarming a honeycomb, surrounded the hotel. Shop windows were being boarded up. The contra-flow vehicle traffic plan began. Inbound lanes to the city were turned outbound. Ross considered other modes of transit out of the city—bus, train, rental car—but to no avail. With his flight almost a day away, Ross bided his time under a beautiful moonlit night among some of the oblivious visitors to Bourbon street. Pedestrian traffic was light. In preparation for being stranded, Ross purchased a flashlight and enough food and bottled water to get him through about four days.

Sunday morning the sun shone through his hotel room window. "What a gorgeous day for a hurricane," he thought. He called the airline. His flight was still on for 3 p.m. He dressed and took a shuttle to the airport. They cancelled his flight. "Sorry buddy, you're on your own," said the airline ticket agent. There was no prospect of getting out of the Big Easy. Hundreds of anxious travelers were experiencing the same panic.

Ross made his way to the airport police station and offered his emergency management and medical services if they were to be needed. They took him in and shared stories about how they were getting their own families out of town and how this was going to be the worst storm ever to hit New Orleans. But he felt safe; he had shelter and camaraderie.

About mid-afternoon another officer arrived and told Ross that some rental cars were available nearby and he should just get out of town. He took that advice, but not without apprehension and guilt. "I felt kinda like a coward," he recalls. Guilt turned to regret a few hours later while standing outside his rental car parked on the bridge over a bayou as the first pulse of Katrina's rains arrived.

A cell phone and Blackberry™ kept Ross tethered to the world beyond the danger zone. "Go north, not west," a friend monitoring New Orleans traffic from the Twin Cities told him. He did so after eventually crawling off the bridge. "It took three hours to travel 17 miles," Ross says. To head north was good advice. Many of those traveling west were stranded as the hurricane pounded its way through the region. For miles north on I-55, exit ramps were closed by armed national guard troops. Vehicles that ran out of fuel were abandoned on the side of the road and some of their occupants would just jump into other vehicles. Through the dark and rain, Ross white-knuckled his way to relative safety, arriving at a motel in Batesville, Miss. He slept and then drove straight home Monday morning.



"The further away I got, the less information there was about the storm damage. It was eerie how out of touch people were," says Ross of the radio coverage.

Later that day, the levees broke in the Crescent City. By Thursday, Ross was in the state Emergency Management Emergency Operations Center, coordinating Twin Cities ambulance services to render aid to the submerged city. A few days after that, under armed security, the ambulance crews he dispatched were camped outside the very convention center where he had given his presentation. The horror of what occurred in that facility between his visit and the arrival of Twin Cities emergency medical personnel has been chronicled. The medical personnel and ambulances he helped coordinate saved countless lives. In all, 22 ambulances were sent to the Gulf Coast region from Minnesota, with 10 ambulances and 92 personnel from the Twin Cities.

"Though I felt bad about leaving those officers, I probably did more good by doing my job from up here," reasons Ross.

by Mike Woolsey, UW-RF Publications Office