Resourceful and Tough: The Fifth Circuit Libraries Pull Together to Weather Hurricanes

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When Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast, they did their best to rattle the Fifth Circuit library system. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals Law Library is headquartered in the John Minor Wisdom Courthouse in downtown New Orleans. Erected in 1915, the courthouse has withstood other natural disasters, such as Hurricane Betsy in 1965.

Open to judges, lawyers, and even the general public, it has 10 branches scattered throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. “We evacuated our New Orleans staff as soon as we heard Katrina was going to make landfall,” says Circuit Librarian Kay Guillot. “We were worried what would happen to all our law books, but I knew my first responsibility was for the safety of my staff.”

With two hurricanes, a displaced judiciary, and a flooded headquarters city, just how long did the Fifth Circuit library close? “Library services were never actually ‘closed,’ since the satellites picked up the reference slack,” Guillot says. “The majority of the headquarters staff was off from August 29 through September 16. We reconvened technical services operations in Baton Rouge on September 19. The physical headquarters library reopened on November 14. So if you’re talking about the New Orleans location, it was closed from August 29 through November 11.”

As the city of New Orleans flooded in the aftermath of Katrina, many of the evacuated New Orleans personnel fled to Baton Rouge. Maralena “Tootie” Murphy, the Baton Rouge branch librarian, went from a solo operation to a nine-person staff in a matter of days. “The challenge of accommodating the extra court personnel from New Orleans with office space and working accommodations proved to be easier than expected,” she says. “The additional workload at the Baton Rouge Satellite Library, due to extra judges, attorneys, their staff, and related court personnel, increased the normal court activities but were handled efficiently due to extreme cooperation by all who joined the Baton Rouge staff.”

Guillot and her technical services staff were appreciative of Murphy’s attitude and
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by Amy Hale-Janeke and Jennifer Laws

generous spirit. “Tootie was a vital part of our post-Katrina operation,” Guillot says. “She opened her library to eight additional staff, one of whom was her boss. She also provided temporary housing for homeless library staff members in her own home. We basically took over her library.

“We set up shop in every vacant space, encroached in her refrigerator, commandeered her coffee pot, and I’m sure over shared about all the little recovery details in our personal lives,” Guillot adds. “Through it all, Tootie remained generous, cheerful, and full of grace. And remember, she did this all with very little time to prepare and no way to say no. We swept in on her at a moment’s notice, and then we left abruptly with nary a by-your-leave. Tootie is a true post-Katrina hero!”

New Headquarters in Houston

While Guillot and others were finding temporary shelter in Baton Rouge, many New Orleans judges and judicial staff went to Houston. The city became the temporary headquarters of the Fifth Circuit, and judges and court staff gathered there to formulate how and when they would be able to come back to New Orleans.

Houston Branch Librarian Tina Ting and her staff had to arrange to serve twice as many judges while finding room for several displaced co-workers, all while dealing with an almost total lack of communication abilities.

“When the phone system went down, the e-mail and the network did not work; we found other ways to communicate,” Ting says. “We used instant messaging, cell phones, and personal e-mail accounts. There is always another way.

“In addition to serving the research needs of our regular judges, we were also receiving more research requests from judges who had been displaced,” Ting adds. “We worked it out and went on with business as usual.”

Libraries located inland fared better than the coastal branches, but the librarians there were just as dedicated to helping out. Austin Branch Librarian Sue Creech took on the role of communications czar, along with providing back-up reference services to any
Fifth Circuit researcher in need. According to Guillot, Creech was “our vital link in communicating.”

Guillot was not able to access e-mail or place out-bound phone calls immediately after the evacuation of New Orleans, so she “relied on [Creech] to disseminate essential information to the rest of the federal circuit,” she says. “[Creech] served as a conduit between the other circuit librarians and myself, facilitating information about court operations.”

Perhaps most importantly, says Guillot, Creech provided daily updates to the emergency contact list to all reachable staff about the welfare and location of each member of the Fifth Circuit library. “After the hurricane, with so many displaced librarians, the emergency contact list was really important,” says Ting. “When Sue started the daily report, we were all in the know.”

Library Staff Come Together
Deputy Circuit Librarian Michael R. Smith was one of the staff relocated to Houston. “Katrina also showed me what a great and caring city Houston is,” he says. “Everyone was so kind to the New Orleans evacuees.

Even the panhandlers, when they realized you were from New Orleans, refused to take your change.”

Smith was one of the worst-hit staff members, losing his entire Lakeview house and its contents. He went back recently to view the damage. The house was underwater for weeks so Smith had to don a hazmat suit and mask in order to go into what was left of his home. “You know, if I had a coin that was worth a million dollars somewhere in that house, I wouldn’t look for it,” he says. “The smell is too awful, and you cannot imagine what your possessions look like after soaking in water for four weeks.”

Smith has dealt with natural disasters before in his career and has seen how staff comes together. “Katrina reminded me how resilient librarians have always been in tough times,” he says. “In the early 70s I worked with a team of librarians to help salvage Wilberforce University’s rare books in the aftermath of the Xenia [Ohio] tornado. The conditions were horrible, yet we persevered for weeks. After Katrina, I saw the same spirit in librarians throughout our region.”

One of the newer librarians, Amy Hale-Janeke, was hired two weeks before Katrina hit and spent her first few weeks with the Fifth Circuit library working in the Houston branch. “We thought she was brave and a little crazy to want to come to work for us after such a disaster, but her loyalty to us in the face of Katrina is just the sort of enthusiastic, and slightly crazy, behavior we like to encourage,” Guillot says.

As she reviewed her whole evacuation experience, including crowded working conditions and displaced employees, Guillot says, “I can’t say enough good things about our satellite or branch librarians. They truly stepped up to the plate when called on to either host headquarters staff or take over reference duties. Four satellite libraries provided that most basic help—they opened their libraries to house displaced headquarters staff. I personally evacuated to the home of my friend and colleague, Susan Hicks, the Jackson, Mississippi, satellite librarian. Consequently, on August 30, one day after Katrina hit, I was able to report to work at a federal court library. That was a perfect location from which to confer with judges on our court and start formulating plans for the temporary headquarters library. Soon after, I went to Baton Rouge to set up my technical services department.”

When Guillot heard news that Gulfport, Mississippi, was especially hard hit by Hurricane Katrina, she was immediately concerned about the welfare of Gulfport Branch Librarian Julie Capuano. “We did not have any news about her for several days after the storm because all communications had been knocked out,” Guillot says. “Thankfully, we later found out that she and her family were safe. The Gulfport Branch did have some minimal water damage, mainly from leaks, but fortunately the library collection was spared significant damage.”

Ting sums up her experience, “All in all, I learned that librarians are resourceful and tough,” she says. “Some people fall apart after a hurricane. For the librarians, it is business as usual.”

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