

The Katrina comeback: 'Mission accomplished'

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newwave@tulane.edu



Editor's Note: In this [series of articles](#), colleagues and friends of Tulane University President Scott Cowen write a remembrance of their work with him. [Sylvester Johnson](#) is senior associate vice president of facilities services at Tulane.

My remembrance of my work with Scott Cowen would be the Hurricane Katrina episode.



Sylvester Johnson, left, and President Scott Cowen tour the Tulane uptown campus, surveying damage after Hurricane Katrina. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Sitting in a hotel in Jackson, Miss., in August 2005, with the “away” team and housing several hundred Tulane students at Jackson State University, we were preparing to head back to the campus in New Orleans. Then Yvette Jones, our executive vice president, got word that the water was rising.

Ultimately, we knew that the levees broke, and Scott and a cadre of administrators along with the facilities hurricane crew were trapped in the Reily Student Recreation Center.

We were faced with “what do we do to get them out?” With the guidance of Yvette, help from board members and coordination with the facilities hurricane crew, we developed a plan.

We had to send in a helicopter under darkness three times before we could retrieve Scott and crew. The first two times were failed attempts for various reasons, such as being turned around at New Orleans' borders.

On the third time, just at daybreak, the facilities crew brought Scott to the batture behind Audubon Park by boat, dump truck and man lift (I'm told), so that a helicopter finally brought them to an airport, where a plane was waiting to take them to Houston.

In Houston, to see Scott walk into those meetings and immediately take control was amazing. He was calm and right away started directing everyone on tasks that needed to be accomplished. The day he walked in wearing shorts and a casual shirt, I remember telling someone, “This is a done deal.” His calm but stern directions earned him the respect and dedication of all in the room ? a true leader.

The phrase I remember from him to this day is, “Folks, we have to get Tulane up and running for the spring semester. If not, we may as well close the doors.”

That incentivized everyone in the room, and like wildfire it spread to all Tulanians. The rest is history ? mission accomplished.