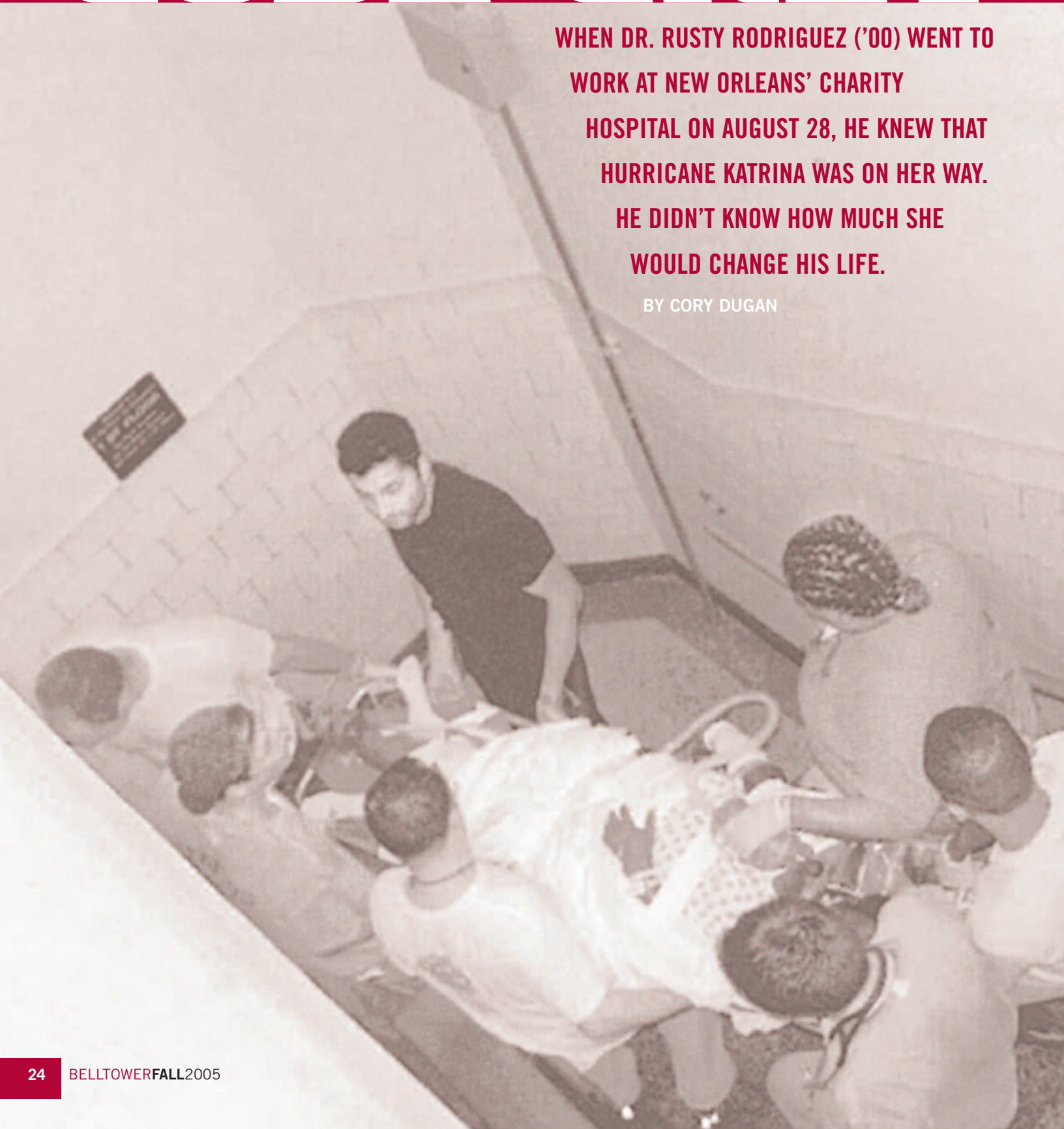


CODE GREY

WHEN DR. RUSTY RODRIGUEZ ('00) WENT TO WORK AT NEW ORLEANS' CHARITY HOSPITAL ON AUGUST 28, HE KNEW THAT HURRICANE KATRINA WAS ON HER WAY. HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW MUCH SHE WOULD CHANGE HIS LIFE.

BY CORY DUGAN



CODE GREY” IS a term used by many medical facilities during emergency weather conditions; at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, it was used to designate the skeleton on-call crew of residents, nurses, and staff doctors needed during hurricane warnings.

Charity Hospital, located a few blocks away from the New Orleans Superdome, was the oldest and largest public hospital and trauma center in the city. Built in 1939, it had two principal missions—to treat anyone regardless of ability to pay, and to serve as the principal teaching hospital for Louisiana State University.

“Usually the on-call team stays at the hospital for about 36 hours, the storm passes, and everyone goes home,” explained Dr. Rusty Rodriguez (’00), who was a LSU resident in internal medicine and pediatrics at Charity when Code Grey was called for Hurricane Katrina at 7:00 a.m. on Sunday, August 28.

“Since that’s what most people expected for this storm, most of us brought scrubs—and limited snacks—for just a couple of days.”

THE WATER STARTED to rise at Charity late Monday night, after the levees broke and Lake Pontchartrain began to reclaim the low-lying city. The basement—location of the power generators, computer networking, medical records, and the morgue—was flooded. Anticipating (correctly) that the floodwaters would soon overtake the hospital’s ground floor, location of the emergency room and radiology department, it was decided to create a makeshift ER in a second-floor auditorium. Rodriguez said that residents, nurses, and other staff immediately began to carry



Rodriguez surveys the post-Katrina scene along flooded Tulane Avenue outside Charity Hospital.

patients upstairs, one by one, on spineboards.

Just prior to the hurricane, a busload of “special-needs patients” was delivered to Charity; Rodriguez explained that about ten of them were on ventilators, which were inoperable after the flood knocked out the hospital’s power. These patients had to be “ambubagged”—i.e., ventilated by hand—for the duration. Since no labs were available, the doctors’ management of most patients relied solely on history and physical observation to determine the patients’ needs.

Four dialysis patients were under Rodriguez’s service and desperately needed dialysis during the week. “We managed these patients the best we could with the medications that the pharmacy had on hand,” he said. “The frenzy of activity was so much to handle for

“Just as the sun was rising it was possible to see almost the entire city from the roof of the 19-story hospital. In the distance, numerous fires could be seen burning out of control, devastating homes and other buildings. The streets were filled with water as far as I could see, and with the people wading through, it resembled some type of post-apocalyptic scene.” — Rusty Rodriguez



Rodriguez (center) with colleagues at Charity Hospital: (l-r) Drs. Phil Huong, Bill Leefe, Fred Lopez, and Melissa McKay.

these patients who were so fragile to begin with.”

The temperature became smothering inside the powerless hospital. The staff slept on the roof of the 19-story building to escape the heat, but the non-ambulatory patients had to suffer the heat and were not doing well. Rodriguez recalled one patient who had an elevated temperature and was becoming septic.

“Because his veins were so poor, he needed a central venous catheter—a large IV that is inserted into one of the large veins of the body such the internal jugular, femoral, or subclavian,” he recounted. “We held flashlights as one of the ER chief residents put in the line and started antibiotics prior to moving the patient upstairs. It was a standard procedure done under such surreal circumstances. And it was one of the first times during the week that we faced such desperation and

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panic in the faces of the patients.”

“My nephew, Dr. Rusty Rodriguez, is a resident at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. He lived through experiences no one should have to live through. No food, no water, no power, people suffering, people dying. And, of course, no communications. When he needed to communicate with another hospital down the street, he had to take a boat. That worked—as long as the snipers were taking a break. Rusty came through it all, and he’s our family hero—but I think maybe we asked too much of Rusty and of all the others who shouldered the terrible burden of caring for the sick in such sickening circumstances.”—Michael Copps, Federal Communications Commissioner (from a September 15 FCC field hearing report)

RODRIGUEZ SAYS HE doesn’t like that term, *hero*.

“We went into medicine to take care of people, and this situation presented an unusual opportunity to do that,” he said. “I saw my fellow residents and nurses and other staff perform incredible, selfless acts for people that they’ll never see again. I think that such a horrible situation brought out some of the best qualities in the people around me. And from other stories I’ve read, people all over the city were doing the same.”

But while he was marooned in Charity Hospital, Rodriguez wasn’t always sure what was happening elsewhere in the city. He said that he and the rest of the staff met twice daily in the darkened foyer of the hospital to discuss evacuation progress and any news they had received from the outside world. They heard that there was a flotilla of National Guard boats waiting to cruise the streets of the city, but they were not allowed to enter the waters by the officials in charge.

“Very few National Guardsmen were around, and we heard rumors of random violence, looting, and total anarchy in the streets,” Rodriguez said. “I think the most alone I felt was during this time, when from the top of the hospital we watched hundreds of people wade through the water onto the interstate, waiting for anyone to come pick them up. We had a good vantage point to see the thousands outside the Superdome, waiting to board buses.

“The city was pitch black at night, and I saw more stars in New Orleans than I had ever seen before.”

There were approximately 220 patients at Charity when Katrina hit on Monday morning, Rodriguez said that ten or so were evacuated on Wednesday.

“We evacuated maybe another 15 on Thursday by boat down the street to Tulane [University Hospital], where helicopters landed to transport patients from the roof,” he said. “We were told by the people driving the boats that we could send no more patients, so my staff physician and I took a boat with a police sharpshooter down the flooded streets to Tulane. Because of the gunfire in the streets that morning, there were police snipers perched on all the corners between Charity and Tulane. Besides other armed transport airboats, the streets were mostly deserted except for a few people still wading through the water with a few possessions on the way to the Superdome and Convention Center.”

Rodriguez and the rest of the Code Grey crew finally left on Friday evening, September 2. They had come prepared to be on call for 36 hours. They left after about 130 hours on duty—most of that time without power, water, or telephones, with ever-dwindling supplies of food and medicine to treat their patients. They left in airboats after the last of their patients had been evacuated and the doors to Charity Hospital had been locked. Probably for the last time.

Health and safety officials in New Orleans have announced that Charity is too badly damaged to reopen.

RUSTY RODRIGUEZ IS currently living on a Finnjet cruise ship that normally ferries tourists between Germany and St. Petersburg, Russia.

Courtesy of FEMA, it is now docked on the river at Baton Rouge and houses displaced medical residents, dental students, medical students, nursing students, and faculty from New Orleans. The LSU residency program is still functioning out of Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Houma, and other locations in Louisiana. Rodriguez is working at Baton Rouge General Hospital, where his recent and upcoming duties include working with renal patients and in pediatric



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and neonatal intensive care units.

Dr. Malinda Fitzgerald, professor of biology at CBU, said her conversations with Rodriguez emphasized the inequities that occur in our communities. “It made me very angry, but I’m very proud that Rusty was there,” she said. “He is a caring, compassionate person and has been deeply affected by this experience.”

“Certainly, I don’t think I’m the same,” Rodriguez admitted. He said that his career goals haven’t really changed since Katrina, but the route he’ll have to take to get there seems to have changed dramatically.

“There’s a lot of uncertainty and concern right now about our training,” he said. “But all the residents are hoping for the best. There are still a lot of patients to take care of, and I hope that we can find a way to keep our training intact.” ■