





with Mayor Knox White

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GBM: Recently the city opened the newly renovated section of the Carolina First Center. (That is a milestone is it not?)

White: Yes. Upgrading the Center was our number one goal after the city bought the old Palmetto Expo in 2000. We managed to cobble together \$12 million for renovations to make the center more competitive. Building a new center would have cost hundreds of millions of dollars, so we have a real bargain and it's still one of the largest convention centers in the southeast.

GBM: What has owning the convention center meant for the city?

White: The economic impact to the region is over \$50 million annually. It is also the only space large enough to host some big events.

GBM: What has been most memorable about the Carolina First Center?

White: When I think about the convention center, I cannot help but think about the Katrina rescue operation. It is an untold story in large part because, when the evacuees were here, we went to great lengths to protect their privacy.

Soon after taking ownership of the Expo Center we discovered it was a federally-designated evacuation center for natural disasters. We used that designation to apply

for \$1 million in federal funds for some urgently needed renovations. When we heard that more evacuation centers were needed for victims of Katrina, we contacted the Red Cross. In just a few days, 238 evacuees were on their way. They were called the "late" evacuees, people who were late in getting rescued from rooftops or, in a few cases, people who actually resisted leaving.

GBM: So how was the experience?

White: Very positive and very surprising. Any fears we had were unfounded. For example, one of the arrivals wore a t-shirt that said, "Evacuee by force, not choice." He actually hid in his attic from rescue teams and was only discovered because he played his radio too loudly. But he turned out to be a wonderful personality. After a few days in Greenville, he was familiar with downtown and even organized groups of evacuees to visit the Bob Jones Art Gallery and other museums. He walked into the Greenville News to tell his story. He said many of the evacuees in Greenville turned out to be his neighbors in New Orleans, but he had never known their names until coming to Greenville. The horrific experience turned him into a more caring and loving person, he said.

GBM: Were you prepared for the number of people?

White: Yes - thanks to the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, and countless ministries and

volunteer agencies. The city played a lead role in coordinating operations. In short order, we had cots and air mattresses, thousands of blankets, food operations, showers, even accommodations for 100 or so pets! Our special guests were overwhelmed by the many kindnesses and the special services offered. We set up a live feed to New Orleans television and had extensive services to help people connect with friends and relatives. I doubt many evacuees around the country enjoyed hot Krispy Kreme donuts every morning, but ours did!

GBM: Did many of the evacuees stay in Greenville?

White: Most found their way back home, but many have stayed. They all had their story of near drowning and dramatic rescue. They were still in shock when they arrived. But, over time, their "New Orleans" personalities came through in music and, in some notable cases, in cooking! One evacuee was adopted by a church in Travelers Rest. He prepared the most authentic New Orleans meal I have ever enjoyed, including a tasty gumbo with all the trimmings - he said it was his way of saying "thank you." The individual stories were uplifting and positive even in this tragic circumstance. ■

Look for the Mayor's next Q&A in our April issue.