Is there anyone in this room who hasn’t seen or heard of the hospital horrors during Katrina in New Orleans? 60 Minutes had a most moving segment of an interview with the doctor at Memorial Hospital who has been victimized by an ambitious politician who booked her with second degree murder. Other stories have been aired about Tulane and Charity, but has anyone heard about Touro Infirmary? Not a word of praise for a private non profit faith based hospital which rescued itself.

Touro Infirmary is a 154 year old hospital founded by Judah Touro, with a mandate to care for the indigent sick. Its mission statement reads “Touro is guided by the principles of Judaism to provide the highest quality and most compassionate health care.”

Touro had just had a change of leadership. Our previous President and CEO had resigned, and the new President, Les Hirsch, had started on the job on August 22. He had come to us from Denver, where floods are few and far between. I had just met Les once, as he made the rounds of the hospital, introducing himself to his staff.

We all watched Katrina make its slow way into the Gulf, getting more powerful by the minute. On Saturday morning, August 27th, Les put the hospital’s hurricane disaster plan into effect. This meant essential personal had to report, and non essential personal stay away. Fortunately for me, the Archivist is considered nonessential, as I had a very sick husband to evacuate. Essential staff, their families, and even their pets were in lock down mode in the hospital. By Sunday, the hospital had set up their command center, and established an emergency staff of about 600 employees who knew their posts. Les Hirsch handled contacts with the world. Dr. Kevin Jordan, the Medical Director, took over patient care. Touro was fortunate in that Dr. Jordan had a background in the AirForce,
with training in Areo-Medical Evacuation. Who ever thought he would need this at Touro?

Now, Touro is in the sliver by the river, which by in large did not flood. However, the streets around Touro always flood, even in a summer shower. The Emergency Room is on the lowest of the low, and because of that, Touro moved its entire ER operation upstairs before the hurricane hit. Because every hospital room has windows, patients had to be moved into the halls.

There were 250 patients who could not be discharged. With patients and their families, staff and their families, Touro was sheltering about 2,000 people. 250 Patients, with only eight physicians on duty. That’s a lot of overload. Dr. Jordan, in the best MASH tradition, prioritized patients for evacuation, color coding them and getting them ready ahead of the rescue forces that they hoped they would never need.

Monday the 29 Katrina came ashore. The power in the city went out, and the hospital’s generators came on. At 11 AM the storm was at its worst, but by midafternoon, it had cleared enough for the management team to assess the damage. As predicted, ER was flooded, and some windows blown out, some ceilings were leaking, but the hospital was still inhabitable. There had been about 5 feet of water in the street, which came into the first floor of the hospital, but that quickly drained. Everyone thought the worst was over, and New Orleans had dodged the bullet. Les Hirsch and his team heaved a sigh of relief. They were even able to walk out side to see the damage to the neighborhood.
Watching the television at my daughter’s house in New Iberia, Freddy and I thought we would be able to go home in a day or two, after we finished the Cajun gumbo and crawfish bisque.

Tuesday morning, my son in law woke me up early, saying, “Cathy come look. The levees have broken, the city is flooded and it could be up to 10 feet in places.”

As I watched in horror, I saw my neighborhood underwater, and I feared for Touro and its patients and staff.

When the levees broke, the water that surrounded the hospital was there to stay. The flooding around Touro never got past the first floor, but what happened next is the stuff of nightmares. Generators depend on fuel, and a load of fuel delivered to the hospital in a military truck contained sandy sediment. This clogged the pumping system, and damaged the generators, and they began to fail. No power means no lights, no air conditioning, no elevators in a 10 story hospital. Food, medicine, and patient care had to be delivered up as much as ten floors by stairs. Personnel formed human chains in the stairwells to deliver food. The hospital became a hot box. Some patients died because their temperatures rose to 106 degrees. The staff started knocking out windows just to get air in. Then the telephones went out. Cell phones had already failed in the 504 area code. The domino effect of loss of power meant no running water. Worst of all, life support systems went out, and some patients owe their lives to the staff who pumped air into their lungs. Les Hirsch ordered the evacuation of patients, saying, “Evacuation will take a massive effort, adequate ground and air transportation would be essential”. Chief of Staff Victor Tedesco found a pay phone in the emergency room with a dial tone. This was the one phone line to the outside world, but no one responded to our calls for help, or tried to contact us. At
this point, Les wondered why no one from any governmental agencies was responding to
us, and he began to lose hope that they would. Eventually they did receive a handful of
National Guard troops, but not enough to make them feel secure given reports of the
criminal behavior underway in the city.
They heard of widespread looting and armed gangs in the city, but Touro’s security
locked down the hospital, and the 2nd district police were housed inside the hospital.
Les was finally able to contact John Matessino, president of the Louisiana Hospital
Association, who became Touro’s only lifeline to the outside world. He secured the help
of Acadian Ambulance Service, the company which helped evacuate the most seriously
ill patients. To get patients to the helicopters, remember, there were no elevators. They
had to be carried up or down the narrow staircases to the third floor of the hospital, across
the bridge over Prytania Street to the garage, then up the garage ramp to the level of the
heliport. To get to busses, the patients had to be carried down the stairs, to street level,
all in stretchers, wheelchairs, and occasionally beds. Busses had to run the gauntlet of
street gangs with guns. There was still water in the streets around Touro.
Les contacted hospitals outside the area to arrange to take Touro’s patients. His plan was
to have everyone evacuated by 10PM Thursday, August 31. The first to be evacuated
were the preemies in neonatal intensive care unit. As Dr. Jordan says, “Babies and Kids
go first; they are most vulnerable, and have the most future ahead of them.” Helicopters
were doing runs with patients to the receiving center set up at New Orleans airport.
Everything went smoothly until late afternoon, when the helicopter suddenly stopped
coming. FEMA had diverted them for other rescue operations. What could possibly be
more urgent than a hospital? Acadian, faithfully promised to “fly all night” to finish the job, but FEMA had no emergency lighting at the airport, so they were grounded.

The morning of Thursday, September 1st, operations resumed and Les says they were making great progress, with only 78 patients left to evacuate, when the Fire Department Superintendent informed us that with the situation in the Superdome out of control and Touro had to be empty and closed within the hour, even if patients had to be left behind. Like the brave commander at Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge, Les said “Nuts”. That was not going to happen on his watch. What he actually said was, “Make no mistake about it, we leave after the last patient has left.” The next couple of hours became intense, helicopters ferrying patients in rapid succession, and the medical staff president, Dr. Tedesco, called his father the coroner of Terrebonne Parish and arranged for a fleet of passenger busses to finish the evacuation. Steven Kupperman, Chairman of the Board of Touro, who incidently rode out the storm in the hospital along with his elderly parents, was able to get more busses from San Antonio. The staff manned a caravan to take the last 400 staff and family members out, though the very mean streets, with armed security. Dr. Jordan and Dr. Tedesco pushed the last wheel chair patients up the ramp at a dead run. Dr. Jordan says it reminded him of the scene from “Miss Siagon.” Not one patient was left behind.

Once Les Hirsch and his senior staff knew every patient was safely out of the hospital, and they knew because they “swept the building floor by floor, they began to close the Touro, and leave their devastated city. It was then 1PM, Sept. 1. The busses and private cars caravanned out, led by fire engines and national guard, by way of Tchoupitoulas
Street, next to the Mississippi River, the highest ground in the city. This was Les’s 11th day on the job as President and CEO.

Les sat up a command post in Baton Rouge, and kept touch with staff by email. Dr. Jordan returned to Touro on September the 13th, to oversee the opening. 27 days later Touro opened its Emergency Room in New Orleans, the first hospital to do so. For four months, Touro was the only adult full-care hospital operating in Orleans Parish. Touro celebrated the first baby born in a New Orleans hospital after Katrina. I came back to work the second week in November. The Archives suffered very little damage, because it is on the second floor of an outbuilding, but lack of air-conditioning and humidity did take its toll on some of the older cloth-bound books. Our most precious possessions, the Admission and Death records from 1855 to 1916 are currently being rebound and the pages deacidified, thanks to the generosity of members of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. And our precious portrait of Judah Touro is being restored thanks to Arnold and Deanne Kaplan’s recommendation to the Jewish Federation of the Lehigh Valley.

Today Touro has resumed many of its pre-Katrina services, and has recruited members of the staff of other hospital which remain closed. It has reopened 270 beds, and remains full almost every day. The nature of Touro has changed, after Katrina, from a community hospital nestled in the Garden District in Uptown New Orleans to a true medical center. Our treatment of indigent patients has doubled. Judah Touro would like that a lot. I like to think it was the faith based mission of Jewish ethics and values, which certainly guided our CEO, staff and Governing Board during the crises and gave them the strength to pull off the miracle at Touro Infirmary, an unsung success story from Katrina.