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Katrina survivors touch down in San Diego

By: DENIS DEVINE Staff Writer

"Goodbye to Louisiana!" shouted a passenger on a most remarkable flight Sunday, as cheers filled the cabin of a chartered 737 jet lifting off from Baton Rouge, La.



Samual Sykes carries his 86-year-old mother-in-law Melba Lang off the plane Sunday afternoon as evacuees arrived in San Diego from Baton Rouge, La.

Jamie Scott Lyte

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When the plane touched down at 4:55 p.m. at San Diego's Lindbergh Field, another cheer filled the plane.

This remarkable journey of 82 beleaguered survivors of Hurricane Katrina out of Louisiana shelters and into a warmly welcoming San Diego was made possible by San Diego businessman David Perez.

The oil exploration company executive paid an estimated \$250,000 of his own money to bypass professional relief operations whose slow pace propelled him into action.

A week earlier, the families flown west by Perez were bracing for the onslaught of a Category 5 hurricane. Some evacuated New Orleans before the devastating storm hit; others hunkered down and endured days of torturous conditions, without food and drinkable water, in a city brutalized by the most destructive natural disaster in the nation's history.

But Sunday, 82 emotionally exhausted men, women and children left Louisiana on a jet chartered by Perez for what they hoped would be safe harbor and better conditions in San Diego County.

"This is your new home, ladies and gentlemen!" Perez shouted in a hoarsening voice as the plane made its quick descent over Balboa Park. "This is America's Finest City, its cleanest city, its most beautiful city, and it's all yours!" Again, cheers, and not a few tears.

Painful memories

The hurricane survivors disembarked to a throng of news cameras, San Diego politicians and emergency planners and Red Cross officials. Some wept as they slowly walked across the runway to three yellow school buses that would take them to Kearny High School in San Diego. The local Red Cross chapter had hastily opened a shelter there, when they realized Perez was serious about the plan he hatched just last Thursday to bring hurricane refugees from New Orleans to San Diego.

Perez selected Leo Baker to be the first off the plane on Sunday afternoon. That morning, Baker was the first to

take the leap of faith to follow this wild-eyed stranger from San Diego out of an overcrowded Baton Rouge shelter and into the unknown.

"I was kind of nervous," the 35-year-old mortician said. "But I wanted to make a better life. I have nothing. I'm ready to start my life over. New Orleans is not a place I want to go back to."

Baker's recent memories of his hometown brought his voice to a whisper, his eyes far away. Late work the night before Katrina hit prevented him from escaping the "growling" hurricane winds the next morning. For four days, he waited atop a rooftop as floodwaters swamped the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. He watched his neighbors try to escape by floating on tires, and dove after a drowning baby that disappeared into the revolting black water. He said he helped 15 people make it through the water to safety. At one point, he said he faced off with an alligator exploring its newly expanded territory, and tied a tourniquet around a friend's finger after a water moccasin snake attacked.

"I could have lost my life if I didn't know how to swim," he said.

A torn up city

Many on board the plane shared similar stories. Others evacuated just before Katrina struck. All rattled off lists of relatives whom they were seeking. Anthony Powell, a 31-year-old warehouse worker who came with his wife, Denise, and young sons Jordan and Dikiron, left behind four daughters in Kenner, La., when he jumped at the chance to start anew in San Diego.

"We wanted a new start," he said, 1-year-old Jordan bouncing on his knee as their bus followed a police escort to Kearny High School. "We didn't know how long it would be before they fixed up our city of New Orleans. It's tore up! There's not a business running!"

His wife shuddered thinking of the terrifying tide of corpses floating in the flood. "I couldn't go back to that," Denise Powell said. "Some of them could be my family."

A difficult decision

That very fear kept one woman from taking Perez up on his offer of escape.

Joyce Harris-Stewart's son Billy Harris was shot to death on Aug. 25, three days before the hurricane hit. On Sunday morning, Harris-Stewart sat on a cot in a Baton Rouge shelter, sobbing.

"I have a kid I don't even know where his body is," she cried in a broken voice. Though Harris-Stewart escaped on a makeshift raft after a grueling three days on her rooftop, she couldn't leave Louisiana while her boy's body was unaccounted for.

The painful decision to stay or to join Perez's exodus tormented several people at the Baton Rouge shelters Perez visited on Sunday, bringing along reporters from the North County Times, 10News-KGTV and KOGO radio.

David Deculim, a 51-year-old Navy veteran, thanked Perez for his generous offer, but declined.

"I appreciate everything you've done, but it was an act of God that brought us here to Miracle Place Church, and I'm not deviating from God's plan," he said. More than 30 family members applauded and didn't sign up for San Diego.

But it wasn't for lack of salesmanship. As groups circled around him, Perez offered the refugees housing --- even saying "I've got five-star hotels willing to absorb you guys." He offered them jobs: "San Diego has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. Yes, we have jobs in San Diego." He offered them time: "If it takes a few months to get you jobs and back on your feet, I guarantee it; our community will not let you down."

Details, details

The refugees --- mostly black, but some whites and three large extended Filipino families --- will stay at the shelter at Kearny High School while the Red Cross determines their immediate needs and connects them with

other agencies to provide longer-term help.

Perez spent four days almost constantly talking or text-messaging on his Blackberry, buying supplies, negotiating with relief agency bureaucrats and profusely thanking a growing cadre of contributors.

His efforts began while still in San Diego on Thursday morning, and continued as he chartered a private seven-seat Learjet to fly to Baton Rouge in search of survivors. By Sunday evening, he was back, with another chartered plane ---- this time a 737 ---- with 82 people embarking on a new life.

During those four days Perez barely ate and slept, and worked through Saturday night to make sure his flight home to San Diego received a flight plan, necessary approvals and most importantly, passengers. No detail was too small for Perez: when he learned Sunday afternoon that most of his passengers had never flown before, he took 10 minutes on the tarmac to describe over the intercom how to use the Miami Air plane's bathroom without locking oneself in and where to find the paper towels.

A brand-new life

Perez wrapped up another intercom soliloquy on the pleasures of flying by saying the year-old plane was "brand-new."

"They took this out of the gate for you," he said. "I hope that everything from now on in your life is new, useful and good. You deserve it."

A pair of flight attendants stepped into the galley, hiding their tears as Perez told the group in his own choking voice, "I thank God for the strength and blessing to bring all of you to a better place."

His words were greeted with cheers.

Moments before landing, Perez said he would measure success for his mission by "just one life."

"If I can save just one life, isn't that worth a quarter of a million dollars?" he said. "For a quarter of a million dollars, I saved 80 people."

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