

## **GCPTA Presentation**

**By Larry Goodwin**

**Nunez Community College, Chalmette, Louisiana**

**I would like to extend my gratitude and appreciation to Mr. Steve Erickson and the GCPTA for inviting me to speak to such an esteemed group. It is certainly an honor and privilege to be a member of this wonderful organization. I have come to tell you our story.**

**Back in July of this year, Steve and Mr. John Hough with the LCTCS in Baton Rouge came down to visit us at Nunez. John has been to our campus several times since Katrina; but this was Steve's first encounter with the real, if you will," hands-on" scope of this terrible hurricane's wrath.**

**Being the type of person Steve is, I feel he was very moved by what he experienced. He asked me if I would consider speaking to this group about our plight and "The Road Back"!**

**I pondered on developing a power point presentation and, if fact, made one. After reviewing it, however, I recalled something Steve had reiterated to me; "You can see all the photos in the world, and we have, but to understand the total destruction of this area you have to experience and feel it. With that in mind, I will forgo the usual slide presentation and speak from the heart.**

**It would be remiss of me if I did not mention that there were at least two other schools within this organization to experience hurricane related damage to their facilities. Dr. Clarence Hughes at Sowela and Mrs. Dorothy Ortego at McNeese University here in Lake Charles certainly have walked a mile in the same shoes as we here at Nunez. They have shed the tears and know that you can not dwell on disparage; you just do what has to be done to go forward and attempt to do it with a smile on your face.**

**Prior to Katrina, we here at Nunez were in our infancy; our very first semester of our new PTEC program. I had visited every PTEC school in Louisiana and a couple of schools in Texas; namely: Lamar Institute of Technology and The College of the Mainland to learn how to get a**

**program of this magnitude off the ground while minimizing as many mistakes as possible.**

**One of the very first and best pieces of advice that I received was to become a member of the GCPTA. We have taken full advantage of this advice and it has proven invaluable to us and to the success we have enjoyed thus far.**

**That first semester we had 61 students enrolled; unprecedented for a new program. We were full of ourselves and strutting like roosters. Seventy-two hours into the semester, however, Katrina squashed that bravado into a flooded and destroyed mass of rubble. Some of our faculty had taken refuge on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Arts & Sciences Building only to become trapped and isolated for days before paddling out to their homes to find total annihilation. Following the storm, once we were allowed back into the Parish, as I waded through the water and the mud, my heart was broken. I sobbed; I hurt; I felt so useless. We did not know what the future held for us; but the likelihood of us losing both our school and our livelihood seemed very real. I looked around to the water marks that indicated 8 – 10 feet. Nothing had survived: I thought I knew the meaning of the word nothing. Katrina taught me the real meaning of the word. Windows blown out, walls and roofs gone, dead animals strewn around, mobile homes and vehicles in trees, entire neighborhoods washed away with only a concrete slab to indicate that they ever existed. No drinking water, no sewage, no electricity, no nothing; for just after the storm all the modern technological toys we take for granted were not available: cell phones, television, and air conditioning. And we were in the heat of August. My initial thoughts were that of a nuclear explosion. Words are not adequate in describing how you feel at a time such as this. It was a life-changing event for many including students and faculty of Nunez Community College. Things you take for granted: the grocery store, a restaurant, a hospital, a funeral (there was a waiting period to bury the dead for there were no services or hearses available). In fact, there were many coffins displaced to neighborhood areas from the flood.**

**I had a person tell me; “I laugh one second and cry the next”. The emotions made me realize the importance of that razor thin barrier; the tears of happiness are the same as of sadness; with so much in-between.**

**For what is the difference between a person who returned to their home and found all of their worldly possessions but totally ruined; or the person that returned and searched through literally tons of refuse to never find a single example of his previous existence.**

**But then, another emotion kicked in; that of anger. Mad at anything or anyone that got in our way or took a defeatist attitude. It was time to stop self-pity, it was time to become determined and to save our little school and our PTEC Program; it was time to go to work!**

**We were able to salvage a few acrylic models. We dug them out of the mud, hauled them to my house. There, we dismantled everything, disinfected the parts and re-assembled all the models until they were like new.**

**Our great Industrial Partners of whom I will speak about shortly gave us the money to repair that equipment that was deemed salvageable. I do not possess the vocabulary to express my feelings regarding my Industrial Partners.**

**The other stellar performer to stand up and prove his worth was our wonderful chancellor at Nunez; Dr. Tommy Warner: a man in his seventies, of great conviction, un-daunting courage, and an endless work ethic. A man who will not accept “No” for an answer. Officials actually wanted to bulldoze the entire campus. Tommy Warner would have no part of it; and that is why our facility stands today.**

**Between the leadership of my chancellor and the support of our Industrial Partners, Nunez Community College, and in particular, our PTEC Program is in business today. It is one of the few entities in St. Bernard Parish that is providing hope and dignity to its residents. For this small institution serves this community as an icon and stands for much more than just an edifice for education. We are, in deed, part of the fabric that make up its heart and soul.**

**Since Katrina we have worked very vigorously to rebuild. Though over 60% of our campus remains unusable today, we have been able to put together a system that functions and is growing.**

**One trait I do not possess is that of a political nature. Therefore, I will not point fingers or place blame on our plight. Certainly, there is enough of that sort of thing to go around.**

**What I can say is that collectively, through grants, through the magnificent efforts of our staff at Nunez and the tremendous support of our Industrial Partners, who themselves, had to dig their businesses out of the mud and the muck, we are now prospering. Our Industry Partners emphasized to us not to wait on State or Federal assistance; but to be self-sufficient and push forward; for time was of essence. They provided the tools for that self-sufficiency and we utilized those tools to progress. I can honestly avow that not one of my Industry Partners waned in any way towards our support. Our priority with them remains very high.**

**One of the ways to rise from nothing is to become innovative. Since Katrina, we have devised or developed new teaching aid ideas. With the very helpful cooperation and assistance of our terrific vendors; folks like Tim Brown and Jim Bodhaine at Bayport Technical and Training and Bill Draper at Design Assistance Corporation have taken some of our unique ideas, never before offered to anyone, and created a line of new products that can benefit every organization in this room today.**

**Pet Units and Glass Labs are a tremendous asset to prepare our young students in today's environment. But, they are far from a panacea! Good, quality, and meaningful education can be achieved even without these great tools and these new products can enhance even those labs that are fortunate enough to have those capabilities.**

**Today, I can report that our working laboratory has three fine sections: an acrylic static and dynamic lab for teaching theory: dynamic acrylic models of equipment such as floating roof tanks, charcoal filter systems, and centrifuges provide our students with new and excellent resources for learning. A unique "hands-on" lab that prepares prospective process technicians on what they actually do on the job. Areas of concentration that need to be addressed if we are to be successful in our endeavor to produce top-quality process technicians: things like a pipe flange trainer where about 75% of the fires in a petro-chemical plant originate; things like a hose connection trainer, so vital in the day to day operation of a facility and the horror stories that accompany this topic;**

a chemical injection trainer, a huge and often over-looked area in a process operators daily regimen. And, a pilot lab containing a multi-dimensional trainer that has the capability of over 20 exercises that my industrial partners have indicated to me that they want incorporated in our curriculum. I have had plant managers visit our lab. One of the managers pointed to me and said “This is what I want you teaching our people.”

I can not end this presentation without the mention of the real hero's of Katrina and of our PTEC Program at Nunez. That of course, are our students. Mr. Albert Stroink, Manager of the Chalmette ExxonMobil Refinery, has described them as “pioneers”. I could not agree more.

Here you have a people that have lost everything, their entire family: father, mother, grandparents, siblings, and friends have lost everything. Of the over 20,000 homes in St. Bernard Parish, less than 30 had little or no damage. How can you take a photo to accurately describe that? He or she returned with nothing but the clothes on their backs. They, like all the rest of us, thought they would go to safe haven for the week-end and then return to a normal routine like all the other times in our lives. If they had a job, they are working 8 – 12 hours a day, often driving long distances, trying to re-build their properties while attempting to be a parent, a spouse and neighbor. Then every Tuesday and Thursday night, in the middle or all this turmoil they did what they did not have to do; they came to our PTEC class. Today, they continue to live in Fema trailers and very difficult conditions in an effort to recover. That isn't easy: that takes courage; that takes conviction; that, my friends, are the kinds of employee that we should all want to hire!

Ladies and gentlemen; I feel this was an event in our lives that we will one day look back upon as a unique episode in the history of our great nation. To have experienced it and grown from it; while a terrible tragedy, has also demonstrated to each of us that no matter what the station in life: as a person, as a school and as a community we must exercise the grit and commitment to rise. Yes, we experienced the very worst that human mankind can offer during this time. But, to a much greater extent, we have been warmed by the overwhelming kindness of the American spirit when tragedy occurs. I saw with my own eyes, moments when the most-wealthy of individuals and the most-needy of individuals comforted one another with a hug and understanding, with

**no strings or boundaries attached. It was a unique time in our existence when social inequities were cast aside; for we were all in the same boat, eating the same MRE's, feeling the same fears and only each other to comfort us! If we learned nothing else from this terrible storm, it is that we CAN and MUST work, live, and respect one another.**

**Recovery is oh so slow. I described it to my mother like this: You are standing in a field the size of a missing neighborhood. You look down and notice one, small, green blade of grass; hardly noticeable. The next day you return to that very spot and notice that there are now two blades of grass. The growth is slow, but it is happening. There is hope, there are reasons for us to smile and one day, smell the aroma of freshly a mown lawn.**

**Our enrollment this semester is right at 70 students; twice that 1<sup>st</sup> semester following the storm. Our projection for our up-coming third full semester is upwards of 100 students. We look forward to our very first graduates in the spring. Our main focus now is on securing GCPTA endorsement.**

**It has not been an individual effort but the efforts of many individuals that have paved this road. Yes, the road back has been a long and difficult trek; but a successful one and we have many miles to go before we are done.**

**For me, this is the culmination of a career that has spanned nearly 4 generations. I have never been so humbled or so proud of so many.**

**So here we are on this wonderful morning, with this beautiful group of people that we call our constituents. For we proudly stand before you today, a working member and hopefully a contributor to the great future of this fine organization and the tremendous work that it does.**

**I would like to conclude with a thought my cousin sent to me just after Katrina hit our area. I try to think of this at the start of each new day: "Life is 10% of what happens to you and 90% of how you deal with it!"**

**Thank You!**