

THE MARDI GRAS TENT-A DIFFERENT VIEW OF MARDI GRAS

February 27, 2009. My Mardi Gras day ritual has been tailgating with family in a lot near Lee Circle, arriving early to savor a Zulu coconut promised yearly by friends in the crew. However, this year my Mardi Gras experience was far from typical, but one that will remain far more embedded in my spirit. This year I served as a behavioral health volunteer at what has been dubbed, the Mardi Gras Urgent Care Clinic.

If you were to travel down Tulane Avenue, from 7a.m. Saturday, February 21, 2009, through Wednesday February 25, 2009 at 7a.m., you may have missed the large brown "village" of tents and emergency vehicles. You would have heard and seen the screech of ambulances and the scurry of physicians, nurses, EMT's, law enforcement and behavioral health care specialists wheeling gurneys into the crisis tent where injured or intoxicated Mardi Gras revelers would be assessed, appropriately assigned to a trauma stretcher, diagnosed and treated.

Since 2006, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals in conjunction with LSU-HSC has erected the Mardi Gras medical tent to serve as an urgent care center for less acute illnesses and injuries, thereby alleviating stress on the local emergency rooms that since Katrina have typically operated at 90% capacity.

Previous experiences with multidisciplinary teams familiarized me with techniques to calm a hyperventilating patient. However, I was unprepared for the reveler whose hand was impaled on a cyclone fence during a crowd surge. While team members perused car trunks searching for a wrench to extract the remaining fence piece, I held the young woman's hand and began working with her breathing techniques. After one high pitched wail, a smile of relief beamed when the fence piece was extracted. An hour of observation and she was off to Rex deciding to make a necklace from the artifact that was previously lodged in her hand.

Many encounters were not as fulfilling. One patient, a microbiologist, was experiencing day three of heroine withdrawal. She arrived unconscious reeking of what was later revealed as a fifth of vodka intake daily. A quick clothing change revealed infected needle marks on both thighs. Running my fingers through her hair, one minute she sobbed "I want to kick it" and the next minute "I need a fix". Continuing to wretch and sob, she shared her shame "I am a failure". "There is no way out for me." "I am going to die." We discussed a series of recovery opportunities until she began snoring. She was not in bed 06 the next morning.

Of the seventy triaged on that shift many arrived like Bed 06. Some were so intoxicated that placing a Saline IV in their hand failed to arouse them. Those intoxicated with heart rates exceeding 140 were immediately sent to University hospital. (According to the National Institute of Health 40 people die daily from unintended alcohol poisoning.) Parents arrived in disbelief of their 18 year old drinking at all much the less drinking with benzodiazepines. Some arrived angry, but many arrived alert and grateful; one had missed being shot, other only needed staples, escaping a fractured skull. Still another had broken teeth embedded in her gum that a skilled physician extracted.

Each member of the team had a gift to give and each patient gave a gift also. Indeed, these were New Orleanians. This was an opportunity for the multitudes of health professionals to volunteer their services in twelve hour shifts for five days to prevent patients from long waits in emergency rooms while diverting less acute injuries from overpowering New Orleans' emergency rooms.

For me personally, missing Mardi Gras 2009 is not regretted. I saw it from a different view. I didn't catch one bead, but I caught the unique gift of being in a position to help those who needed a hand to squeeze, a shoulder to cry on or a voice to assuage their fear. I also witnessed outstanding quality-centered patient care and camaraderie of team spirit that will acknowledgeable make me a better behavioral health care professional and, oh, I gave up my place on Lee Circle for Margi Gras 2010.

Elizabeth Seton Jenkins

Elizabeth Seton Jenkins, LPP serves on the Executive Staff of Metropolitan Human Service District. Ms. Jenkins , Medical Director Dr. Craig Coenson and Addictive Disorder Director, Cathy Storms, RN served with the multidisciplinary team at the Mardi Gras Urgent Care Unit

Metropolitan Human Services District is a public agency committed to enhancing the quality of life for individuals, youth and families faced with the challenges of behavioral health disorders. Metropolitan Human Services District offers a comprehensive and dynamic system of services that effectively influences the direction and quality of community-based human services through patient-centered care. To this end the continuum of care provides research based prevention, early intervention, treatment, and recovery support services both directly and through community collaborations. For further information please call 504-568-3130

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