BARBER TELLS HIS STORY

THE FORMER HEAD OF THE CAJUNDOME DETAILS HIS VIEW OF THE EVENTS WHICH LED UP TO HIS RESIGNATION

A MONTH AGO, MIKE BARBER—who had completed the Cajundome's first year of operations with a better-than-projected financial statement—was being praised for his management of the facility.

Two weeks ago he resigned under pressure from criticism of his management of the Dome.

The turnaround in Barber's fortunes seems unbelievable at first. But during those weeks between praise and resignation, Barber had fired his assistant director, Greg Davis, over "philosophical differences."

The firing of Davis, a black, for what seemed at the time as vague reasons generated heat in the black community on Barber's boss, Lafayette Mayor Dusty Lastrapes. Eventually some of the conflicts between Barber and Davis came to the surface.

The conflicts and pressures surrounding Barber's firing of Davis led to his resignation on Dec. 12. Lastrapes on that same day announced that RLS would take over total operation of the Dome, subject to City Council approval.

Last week, in his home, away from the battle lines of the past few weeks, Barber reflected on the recent controversies at the Dome. In an interview with The Times he discussed some of the circumstances leading up to Davis' firing and reviewed the chain of events that led to his own resignation, acknowledging that even he wasn't aware of all the behind-the-scenes maneuverings that foreshadowed his resignation.

Below are some of the major events of the Cajundome controversies, as seen through the eyes of Mike Barber, and excerpted from a two-hour interview.

Greg Davis' role in the controversy. His relationship with me is what brought us to the events of the last few months. [Before the Dome opened] Greg had called me with an interest in a position as the assistant manager and had talked with Ken Young and we agreed to interview him. Greg had all those credentials that we were looking for.

Well, down the road came the time to create the position of assistant director. Greg was the clear choice in my mind.

So we discussed at some length that it was very important that he could agree philosophically with my management style.

Barber's management style. During the early days of opening a facility like the Cajundome you almost have to overdo it. It's like going through boot camp. You have to really work at establishing your standards and still remain intact.

My approach: upfront it's going to be a little more demanding but in the long run it comes back many fold.

Differences with Davis. I saw us drifting from the plan that I had worked closely with him and the other staff and put in motion. By turning the plan over to him, I didn't see it being effectively implemented the same way.

Let me give a couple of examples. Barber explained how his policy was to have phones in the office, always handled by a full-time staffer. A lot of our business is conducted over the telephone and people see us through that voice, that personality and that knowledge you can only develop through full-time.

Probably one philosophical difference is [under Greg's direction] there were occasions the office was staffed by a part-time person.

I was seeing the delegation of projects not consistent with the plan, including who would handle contracts, who would handle insurance, who would handle deposits. Where would I see that as centralized in the business office, he saw it spread around. If you were a promoter calling for a cost projection, Greg had the production manager working on it. I would expect my No. 2 fellow to be doing a cost projection, to deal with you. He's a fine young man—just a top-rate finance man. The fact he wanted to go a different direction doesn't mean he was wrong.

There is no right way to run a building. But my job as director is to move us forward in the best way I know how and in a formula that seems to work. And it worked up to the point where he became assistant director and had taken the parade a different direction.

The 500,000th visitor controversy. Every so often you get a bench mark and you celebrate. Some of your attendance figures are absolute because of the turnstile count, and some are a little fuzzier because of banquet and special events.

We predict ahead because news releases got to go out. We want to get a lot of media coverage and hype. Plus, Chicago is an appropriate event because they have been around a while, so they span the ages, and it's going to be close to that 500,000th visitor and the other audiences are falling short. Who really knows where it's going to fall? It's recommended to me that it'll be Chicago, and I say that sounds good to me.

I went on a trip to the Badlands of Dakota and I wasn't near a phone much. And Lisa [Prejean, the Dome's publicist] went on a trip to South Dakota. So she called me, called a collection of managers meeting in South Carolina, which left Greg as assistant director and Lisa's new assistant who had only been with us a couple of weeks.

Apparantly during our absence, Greg and Lisa's assistant determined it was going to happen on Cameo. They called Lisa in South Carolina, either the day of the event or on a relatively tight timetable, and Lisa said, appropriately so, first of all it's already set and second of all, it's really not that precise.

The first I heard about it was when I came back, and in our staff meeting that morning Greg mentioned the 500,000th visitor happened at Cameo. He seemed really intent on bringing that up.

He says, "You know, members of the black community are concerned about that." I said, "Well, is there a problem there?"

Generally the consensus among Barber's department heads was "no." I just took that information from Greg and we moved on in order to other business.

The fired secretary controversy. A secretarial position had been created to help Barber's executive secretary. Then, as I recall, it was going to be the Statler Brothers. And that attendance was falling short. The next major show was Chicago.

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about it, but he's going to talk to the mayor.

This was on a Friday. Greg never came in, doesn't communicate with me. Saturday passes. Sunday passes.

Monday morning we had our managers' meeting scheduled (among Barber and his department heads at the Dome). John told me that I also wanted to meet with him [following that meeting]. Because now we were going to have that meeting I had forrooted for him before I went on a trip.

Monday morning rather than showing up at the staff meeting, I got a call and in a very hostile and angry voice: "I'm going over your head to the mayor." Click.

Well, that came as a bit of a surprise and disappointment. So needless to say he wasn't invited to my meeting that I was having—either the first or the second one.

Davis was then at that point subordinate, AWOL and third, rather than dealing with Ken Young and me, he's over at City Hall with the mayor.

I was still thinking that since he doesn't have my permission to go there and since it's a contract service [meaning Davis isn't a city employee] I couldn't agree with my management style, had philosophical differences and couldn't work with me any longer. And I guess they agreed that he would resign.

The mayor gives him an audience, which rather surprised me. I guess that's the good thing about the mayor—he's always kind of an advantage, but obviously in a case like this it can amount to be a disadvantage because you get involved with an issue that gets to snowballing and how do you get it out of the mayor's office?

Greg apparently talked about his opinions of the differences of how he was being run. The mayor talks to me about it. I give him my views.

Meanwhile they the mayor and the 

attachment with Greg again, I guess that was Tuesday afternoon. Greg, of his own admission, couldn't agree with my management style, had philosophical differences and couldn't work with me any longer. And I guess they agreed that he would resign.

Glenn and the mayor are telling me that Greg has said that. And I'm saying, "Well, that's fine."

Wednesday morning, we had a conversation with Glenn Weber, I understand, in effect of their not going to resign. I'm going to keep my job.

Glenn Weber called me at home Wednesday morning.

I rendezvous
didn't seem necessary. He was covering the story.

From that point things escalated quickly and I guess I'll relate a little bit to help from the TV getting the thing reopened. And that's a shame because it's a personnel matter, and I'm thinking why didn't this become a city matter with the mayor and CAO involved vs. Ken Young and the [private management] contract, which helps to insulate the mayor from that?

Then, I'm to understand, meetings were held at the mayor's office with the personnel committee of the Cajundome board. Meetings were being held with leaders in the black community—people who I had come to know, I felt, fairly personally and people who I didn't understand my sensitivity and would in a situation like this give me some benefit of the doubt.

Meanwhile I'm communicating with my CAO Weber and he was telling me about the meetings, about the pressures and how it's escalating. I offered, "Do I need to sit down with these people?" It didn't seem necessary. He was covering the story.

But the reactions coming back to me made me rather uncomfortable. Little things that you put out of your mind [Barber mentions the 500,000th visitor incident] seem to loom up when you're not ready for them. Pretty soon I'm getting the impression that [Davis was ter-

_and Prove Anything." —Mike Barber_
minated because of the Cameo thing. This is starting to seem like it's bigger than life.

And I'm hearing about commissioner members [of the Cajundome board] meeting with the mayor, and they are insisting that Greg come back to the Dome. Black groups are insisting that Greg be returned to the Dome.

Wednesday night or Thursday night [of the first week in December] I got a call at the house and I met with the mayor at a restaurant so he can be briefed again because he's got to meet with the Personnel Committee [of the Cajundome board on Friday, Dec. 5]. And he really wanted to know if we can reconcile this some way. And I indicated that I really don't think it's in our best interest.

Friday we had a serious meeting, me and Glenn Weber [after the Personnel Committee meeting]. I can sense that he is really concerned about this, and he's asking is there anyway that we could bring Greg back?

I'm concerned: Are we bringing Greg back for the right reasons? Originally I was more than happy to sit with Greg and talk about coming back with some disciplinary action. But if he's coming back as a result of this pressure, then that's no solution at all.

I have a sense of comfort that [Weber's] supportive of me in that decision. Glenn's given me the cues to make this decision so it'll help the mayor make his decision.

The final days. Saturday comes. Wilfred Pierre from City Council goes on TV and says he's not satisfied with the answers to the questions, gives the view that there is perhaps going to be an investigation.

Keep in mind, up to that point, no one from the council, no one from the [Cajundome] board had come to me. It was difficult for me to comprehend: If this is major, how come people aren't coming to me and I can explain what had to happen? But the important thing is the mayor supported me.

Tuesday I get a call from the mayor requesting I call Bob Bacon [the city councilman who serves as council's liaison with the Cajundome]. So I call Bob Bacon, and Bob talks to me about getting together with Wilfred Pierre on Friday. I say that's fine. At this point I'm happy that somebody's interested in talking to me about what happened.

On Thursday I met with Glenn Weber, the mayor and Ken Young. And there was obviously a dramatic turn of events on that day. And in terms of our course of direction, it was determined we would totally privatize the Cajundome. And we'd have a press conference the next morning to that effect.

I would resign to give them the options to take whichever direction they needed to take.

[Editor's note: After last week's interview Barber said he's still not sure of all the elements that mixed and changed to create the "dramatic turn of events" that in effect abolished his position in city government. Even with his city position gone, however, it was unclear to him whether or not there might be a place for him in a privatized operation, he says. But Barber made a decision that made such speculation moot.]

The future. This is a period of just letting things kind of settle. You take a deep breath and say, "Well, where to from here?"

Of course, in this stage in my career and life with a daughter in college at USL and my son in high school and my wife employed as a nurse at Lafayette General, you don't just pick up and move without a plan. We have come to enjoy it here so much, who knows? If the appropriate job were available . . .

At this point in my career I'm 40 years old, I've opened three buildings and I don't need to rush out and prove anything by opening another building.

And our plan was genuine in terms of seeing this project through the opening and then have the opportunity to enjoy that business and the community for many years, at least until the kids were through school. So we're not jumping in any moving van right yet.