The Cajundome Marks 30:
Looking Back. Looking Forward.

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SINCE IT OPENED ITS DOORS in 1985, the Cajundome has been the center of social life in Lafayette. It has been home to concerts, children's shows and graduations; high school, university, semi-pro and pro sports; non-profit events and fundraisers; Mardi Gras balls, state fairs and weddings. Ask any resident about their fondest memories in the city, and chances are there will be at least one Cajundome event on that list—most probably many more than that.

The arena has had a significant financial impact on the community as well, bringing more than $1 billion in taxes and associated income to Lafayette Parish. An Economic Impact Analysis prepared by the Lafayette Economic Development Authority (LEDA) in December 2014 found that the total economic impact of the Cajundome and Convention Center since 1985 was $1.2 billion. Included in that impact are two major construction outlays: the $60 million construction of the arena and the $174 million construction of the Convention Center, which was completed in 2002.

Greg Davis, who has been director of the Cajundome for almost every day of its 30 years of existence, believes the arena was able to succeed because operations have been shielded, for the most part, from politics.

The arena is structured in such a way that the President of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette sits on the governing commission, along with one of its appointees, two appointees from the mayor of Lafayette and one from the council of Lafayette. Over those 30 years, that means two Presidents have served, Dr. Ray Authement and Dr. Joseph Savio. “Dr. Authement and Dr. Savio find this facility so important to the university and the community that they chose to personally serve on the commission,” Davis says. “That has made a tremendous difference in the Cajundome’s ability to operate as a business. There has been no politics in the day-to-day operation, because of that buffer zone.”

Over and over again, Authement, and later Savio, have stood up for the Cajundome and its management, Davis notes. “They want this facility run properly; they don’t want it run like a political machine,” Davis says. “That’s what we need as management.”

Years ago, an assistant director position was created, and Davis wanted Pam Deville—and no one else—for the post. Often in the political community had different ideas, and brought tremendous pressure to bear upon Authement; the argument was that the community wasn’t ready for a facility of such importance to be run by a black man and a woman. Authement stood up to that pressure, and when Davis offered his resignation to help save the arena, Authement refused him.

“It told me that this is what’s wrong with Louisiana, and it’s not what UL stands for. He said, ‘We’ve drawn a line, and I would ask you to join me behind that line.’ And I did,” Davis says.

And Deville is now assistant director of the Cajundome. Several critical events occurred over the life of the arena that contributed to its success. The construction of the Convention Center, spearheaded by Jerry Lake Labrune and Dr. Ray Authement, provided the arena with an additional source of income. In the early 1990s, Acadiana was still reeling from the effects of the oil bust and had dropped off the radar of most national promoters, who didn’t feel they could make any money bringing concerts to the Cajundome. When the Eagles announced they would reunite for the Hell Freezes Over Tour, the Cajundome wanted a date. Two local businesses—Herbert Schilling of Schilling Distributors and Larry Smith of Acadiana Bottling—worked with Rury Clouster at MidSouth Bank to put together the money to bring the concert to Lafayette. Many in town said it was going to be a disaster, but $75 tickets sold out and the concert made a profit. Davis insists the arena was never sold out. “This building has seen success because of a willingness of the commission and management to put itself at risk,” Davis says. “Take hockey. It took a substantial amount of money to get ready for hockey, and the only way to get that back was with ticket sales. We had a 10-year debt load, and we paid it back in three years.”

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Over the years, more than 16 million people have attended events at the Cajundome, but perhaps the most critical role the arena has played in its 30 years of existence wasn’t the usual one, and it wasn’t even expected: Serving as home for hundreds of people affected by Hurricane Katrina. The experience of the Cajundome’s staff during the two months those folks called the arena their home has helped to reshape the way shelters and disasters are handled in the United States.

After the levees broke, thousands of people in New Orleans and the surrounding areas had to leave their homes. Many had no warning at all, and fled with the clothes on their backs and their children in tow. The lucky ones were loaded onto buses and driven to Lafayette, where they were brought to the Cajundome.

“They were children, mothers, seniors,” Davis remembers. “They were in desperate need, and they came here to receive the help they needed.”

The people who arrived, as soon as they moved in, became residents of the Cajundome. They weren’t refugees or evacuees, they were residents – something Davis was adamant about at the time.

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Hurricanes Katrina & Rita

Above: City Parish President Joey Durel, Gov. Kathleen Blanco, Sheriff Mike Neustrom and Dr. Paul Azar at a Lafayette Parish emergency response team meeting in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Below: Even the dome’s concourse areas were pressed into service.

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