The Cajundome was called home by 18,500 evacuees over the two months it served as a shelter. Above, left: The dome offered respite of all kinds. Above, right: Buses lined up, delivering evacuees in waves after Katrina hit.

“We didn’t buy into all the hype that you were seeing on TV; about thugs and looters,” he says. “These were fellow citizens of Louisiana. They were our brothers, our sisters, and they were in desperate need of our help.”

Initially, the Red Cross was in charge. But quickly became clear that the agency was ill-equipped to handle the situation that existed. “This was a major disaster, the likes of which we had never seen before,” Davis says. “We quickly understood there was no playbook for this. We had to think on our feet, and respond immediately, because the needs were so immediate and urgent.”

The Red Cross wasn’t so quick, and had difficulty operating outside its long-held process. But Davis’ crew, which had handled events of all kinds and sizes, was able to adapt. “The Cajundome was no longer an arena. It was not a shelter. This was their residence, they were residents of their homes in the Cajundome. It became their space, their home. Our job was to give them the support they needed as they were working to transition,” Davis remembers.

The Cajundome staff showed compassion for their new residents, and helped people in an impossible situation breathe a little easier. It was just that simple. “That’s what was missing,” Davis says. “We saw them as human beings.” That hurdle continued when Rita struck, and many of the folks in charge didn’t want to put residents displaced by Rita in the same location as those who had been displaced by Katrina.

“They were worried because they were “different cultures,” that’s how they framed it,” Davis says. “They were concerned about mixing those “cultures.” I told them that I had more confidence in these citizens, that in a time of tragedy they will rise to the occasion and help each other – and that’s exactly what they did.”

He recalls one family from New Orleans, an African-American family, who were living next to a family from Lake Charles who had been displaced by Rita. The New Orleans family “adopted” their new neighbors, and helped them navigate the rules and processes, and advocated for the new family. That’s how those two “cultures” operated in proximity to each other, he says.

Davis and his staff got to know so many of the families well. “Many of them told me they had never known a place like this. That they had never felt this much love,” Davis remembers. “And when their kids went to school, they said the same thing. After a few weeks, one resident told me, “Now that I know there’s a world like this, I never want to go back to New Orleans.”

Many of them told me they had never known a place like this. That they had never felt this much love,” Davis remembers. “And when their kids went to school, they said the same thing. After a few weeks, one resident told me, “Now that I know there’s a world like this, I never want to go back to New Orleans.”

The mechanism wasn’t one anyone could desire, but the outcome was positive. “For all their lives, their world view had been so limited they didn’t realize that things should have been much better than they were,” Davis says.

The Cajundome staff worked with residents to find places to live, jobs, schools for their children, and set a standard for this type of disaster in the future.

JB Mouton would like to congratulate THE CAJUNDOME as they celebrate 30 YEARS IN ACADIANA.

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SEPTEMBER 1, 2015 | THE INDEPENDENT

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Top Ten Things To Know About the Cajundome Makeover

1. The roof will be new again.
2. All seating will be replaced.
3. There will be more seating capacity for concert events (and good seats too!)
4. Court side/rink side seating will be available for basketball and hockey fans.
5. Concession areas will be re-designed and food offerings upgraded.
6. Arena entry portals will be re-designed.
7. LED lighting will be installed.
8. Video technology will be upgraded and new.
9. Restrooms will be renovated.
10. There will be a new clubhouse for 600 people.

The Future

A t 30 years of age, the facility needs strong maintenance going forward, Cajundome Director Davis says. “It’s far more challenging to sustain the physical plant,” he says.

Funding has always been an issue. When the arena was built in 1985, the contract set up a partnership whereby the city of Lafayette subsidized operations with a maximum contribution of $500,000 annually, together with capital funding of $100,000 per year. Those caps haven’t changed in 30 years, meaning funding will continue to be an issue.

Currently, the Cajundome is undergoing an $18 million renovation. It’s the first major work done on the arena since 2004, when some major work was done on the roof and other areas of the then-20-year-old facility.

This time, patrons will notice a major difference, Davis promises. “The inside is being totally redone,” he says. “It will look totally different.”

CONGRATULATIONS
ON CELEBRATING 30 YEARS

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Congratulations on 30 years as Acadiana’s premier entertainment venue. We look forward to continuing our partnership for the next 30 years!
Thanks for the Memories

Highlights from the Cajundome scrapbook, clockwise from top left: The Cajuns pack the house; Mother Teresa speaks to the faithful; Cher takes center stage; The IceGator mascot defends his goal; LAGCOE exhibits fill The Cajundome Convention Center; WWE’s Ric Flair; The Harlem Globetrotters and Sesame Street are perennial faves; Sir Elton John rocks the dome; Monster Trucks rule; Disney on Ice brings The Lion King to Lafayette; Taylor Swift greets an adoring Cajundome audience.