



BY MARYN MCKENNA

After the Deluge

EX-DEBUTANTE CECILE TEBO SAVED HER SANITY BY REINVENTING HERSELF AS THE HEAD OF THE NEW ORLEANS POLICE DEPARTMENT'S MENTAL HEALTH SWAT TEAM

Tebo visits a tent city where many of New Orleans's mentally ill camped out after Katrina.



When Cecile Watters Tebo was a little girl, she would hurry home every afternoon, peel off her private-school jumper, hop on her bike and think evil thoughts about her neighbors. Pedaling around New Orleans's lush Garden District, she would imagine that the man in one house was going to hurt his wife and that the woman next door was being mean to her dog. And the person she could see through that wrought-iron fence, strolling from his Italianate mansion to knock at a friend's back door? Casing the joint for theft. She wrote it all down in a notebook. "I wanted to be a police officer, and I thought that was what they did," she says now. "I wanted it more than anything. But that would



not have been considered appropriate, at all.”

For a fourth-generation New Orleanian whose affluent father belonged to one of the most prestigious Mardi Gras krewes, the appropriate life goals went like this: maintain a gorgeous home, perform discreet works of charity, find a ladylike job. Wrestling the threatening and disorderly was not on the list. Nor were raspy polyester pants, noisy handcuffs or thick-soled shoes.

Yet here is Tebo, now 48, standing on a street corner on an autumn afternoon in a bulky, patch-pocketed blouse that bears a crescent-shaped badge. She is cradling a set of leather restraints and rubbing the spot where an angry psychotic just kicked her in the head. And she is smiling.

New Orleans has always appreciated irony. So it seems fitting that when the swirling chaos of Hurricane Katrina swept away much of Cecile Tebo’s beloved city, it deposited her exactly where she wanted and needed to be.

The official line about New Orleans is that the city has recovered from Katrina and is open for business. It is an important story for the state government to tell—New Orleans’s entertainment industry brings in significant tax dollars—and for the city’s weary residents to hear. It is also, in many respects, untrue. On the French Quarter’s side streets, darkened antiques shops bear signs advertising new addresses in the suburbs. Trailers still squat in driveways; in the devastated Lower Ninth Ward, steps once topped by front doors now lead to swaths of empty grass.

But if many sectors of New Orleans are diminished, one is growing more crowded every day: the psychiatric wards. More than half of the city’s mental health workers relocated after the storm; meanwhile, surveys taken since Katrina show high and still rising rates of suicide, anxiety and depression.



Tebo comforts a distressed young man on his way to the hospital for a psychiatric evaluation.

Which Tebo could easily have told them. The administrator of the police department’s crisis intervention unit, she is the salaried chief of a motley, mordant crew of more than two dozen volunteers—nurses, housewives, students, retirees and EMTs—who make up the equivalent of a mental health SWAT team. Operating out of a set of battered vans, they rendezvous with street cops whenever the radio calls in a psychiatric disturbance. Each two-person, eight-hour shift is slammed.

“We have these billboards the state put up, for a crisis help line: YOU’RE NOT CRAZY, CALL US!” Tebo says on a hot September morning, while heading to a call with her shift partner, Adam Graff III. She tosses her long red-blonde hair in exasperation: “The truth is, we’re all crazy now.”

Graff brakes hard at a neighborhood clinic temporarily housed in a double-wide. Two police officers wait outside, minding a small African-American man with one running shoe and no bottom teeth. Over a stained T-shirt, he has wrapped a tattered swath of green satin—a discarded Mardi Gras

costume, pulled from a junk heap somewhere.

“Incoherent, rambling, wouldn’t take his meds,” one cop says, proffering paperwork from the clinic. “He was in a psych hospital, got out last week. He says he’s Mariah Carey.”

“No, he’s not,” Tebo says, climbing down from the van. “We know him.” Her voice drops to a croon.

“Honey, do you remember me? Before the storm, you were living in a group home, remember? We used to see you there, with your sister.”

Graff buckles the man gently into loose restraints that hold his hands at his sides, and Tebo guides him between the van’s bench seats. She perches across from him, keeping up a soft, one-sided conversation while she marks off items on a form:

“Can you tell us how you’re feeling today? Are you feeling down? Were you thinking of hurting anyone? Were you thinking about hurting yourself?”

The man blinks hard; his eyes focus on Tebo’s face. “I was,” he says. “I’m not anymore.”

Cecile Tebo’s affection for the city’s distressed comes from a deep place. For a while, she was one of them. It is hard to credit, looking



at her life now. She lives with her husband, Balad Wing Tebo, and their three sons, ages 12, 14 and 18, in a cream-colored foursquare just a few miles from the ridge that holds back the Mississippi. Their Broadmoor neighborhood in the Uptown section of the city is low-key but upscale, and their house has a burnished comfort.

But on a wall in the kitchen, there is a hand-size piece of artwork, a shadow box of lacquered wood and ivory. It is all that remains of Balad's family piano, which stood in their front room until Katrina's floods crumpled it into splinters and snarls of wire.

In the summer of 2005, they had lived in that house for 17 years and had just renovated it floor to roof. Balad was running a company that installs insulation in navy ships. Cecile was a clinical social worker specializing in adoptions.

It was an unexpected career for someone raised with all the privileges of old New Orleans money. But Cecile had never felt perfectly suited to her family's circumstances. "Growing up, I was so learning disabled," she says ruefully. "I always had to rewrite my thank-you notes." Her prep school had a community service requirement; Cecile worked with physically disabled children and, she says, "All of a sudden, everything just kind of kicked in. I knew I wanted to be a social worker."

But she never forgot her dream of becoming a cop. It must be genetic, she says: Her grandfather, A. Adair Watters, was a corruption-busting police superintendent in the 1940s. "He died the week after I was born," Tebo says. "But I always had this great admiration for what he did."

In 2000, she turned 40 and decided to join the police reserves. "I picked up my paperwork, crying. It was like, 'I'm home,'" she recalls.

Tebo started with once-a-week volunteer shifts; by 2005, she had given up her social work practice and worked her way up to a full-time job as the unit's second-in-command.

Then Katrina happened.

When the city issued the evacuation order, the Tebos left for the Florida panhandle. The storm faded as it approached; the day it came ashore, Cecile went to bed

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thinking they could head home the next day. Early the next morning, she called friends who had stayed in the city. "It's the funniest thing," one told her. "Someone said, 'Your street is wet.'"

The levees had collapsed. By the time the Tebos got inside the house, 28 days later, the walls were swollen with mold.

"I thought, we'll redo the house, we'll take money out of savings, the insurance will kick in," Tebo says, "Then nothing. We hear nothing from the insurance company. Nothing from FEMA. We move four times, we're living in a rental, we have 15 days left before the owners come back."

Dislocation and loss pervaded the city. Some of her acquaintances never returned after evacuating; others came back, struggled and left for good. A close friend, James Kent Treadway Sr.—her children's pediatrician, the son of her own childhood doctor, father of three—lost his practice to the floods and most of his patients to the exodus. He hanged himself in his storm-damaged house.

Tebo broke. She went to bed. She stayed there for seven days.

"I was paralyzed—dark, so dark," she says now, hugging herself in her restored living room. "I couldn't go to work. If we'd had a bridge jumper—we had plenty of those—I would have taken his hand and said, 'I'm coming with you.' I couldn't give anyone hope."

One day, her middle sister called from North Carolina. "I saw the city on CNN," Tebo remembers her saying. "It looks great! It's so good to know you're OK."

Lying in bed, Tebo brooded. In the middle of the night, she got up, turned on the computer, and banged out a letter to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.

"I want the word to get out," she wrote. "We are desperate, depressed, anxious, angry. . . . No, we are not OK."

The next day, she found a doctor and got a prescription for antidepressants. And then she went back to work.

The crises that Tebo and her team face daily would be hard enough if the mentally ill were their only problem. But in post-K New Orleans, nothing is that simple. Not only are there more sick people, but there are fewer places to take them. →



Charity Hospital, a massive Art Deco tower just outside the French Quarter, reserved some 150 short-stay and in-patient beds for the mentally ill. All that is gone: Charity was flooded and closed by the state. The only alternative is the rest of the city's overloaded emergency rooms.

By federal law, patients who enter an ER are guaranteed care until they can be released or transferred. Which means, first, that in a crowded ER, a mentally disordered patient is an unwelcome arrival who might tie up a gurney for days. And second, that Tebo and her team routinely face hostility not just from the patients they rescue but from the rescuers they take them to.

Early in November, about a week after Tebo's promotion to her unit's top position, she and a volunteer are trying to subdue an agitated, shaven-headed man in his thirties. Clutching a toddler, the man's sister explains: He is a schizophrenic. He had been treated by a doctor at Charity. He has not seen his doctor, or taken any psychiatric medication, since the storm. Tebo and her partner secure him in the van. The man curls up tight, eyes squeezed shut, chanting softly to a beat only he can hear: "You fucking me man, you jail me die man."

"Oh my Lord," Tebo whispers over the seat back, "this guy is a time bomb."

At Louisiana State University Interim Hospital, Tebo and her partner fast-walk their patient into the back of the emergency department—and collide with a queue of street cops waiting to deliver three other mentally ill patients.



Tebo catching up with James Knight, who lives in a homeless encampment under the I-10 expressway.

"We're on diversion," a nurse snaps at them.

Tebo takes a deep breath. "First, diversion is for ambulances, and we are the police," she says, fighting to keep her voice even. "Second, this patient has a legal right to care. And third, unless you lock your doors, we are going to keep coming."

To be fair, the ER is full. After 45 minutes, a nurse accepts their patient. Walking out to the van, Tebo shakes her shoulders like a horse trembling at a fly.

"I am just not used to being hated," she says.

Most days are not this hard, but few could be called easy. The unit is chronically short of help. Tebo butts heads with older officers unused to having female civilians play such a prominent role. And few patients go quietly.

"She's been fought with, spat on, had her hair pulled, had her

glasses broken," says Morrie Sandler, an ER physician who is one of her volunteers. "She keeps coming back."

"This job has cured me of the I-wants: I want more of this, I want more of that," Tebo says. "Sometimes we forget what we have, but I come home off the streets and I realize I have been given so much. It keeps me in check."

It is a busy November morning at the historic Parkway Bakery & Tavern. In a moment so meta it could only happen in New Orleans, a crew from the Food Network is documenting the lunch counter's resurrection from the waters that surged out of nearby Bayou St. John—while, in the middle of the bayou, camera-men are filming a submerged house, sunk by the producers of the Katrina police drama *K-Ville* to re-create the storm.

As if anyone needed a reminder. Tebo hoards a generator, an axe and an inflatable boat that seats six—in her attic, because that is how high the waters might rise next time.

Years ago, she began work on a book about her adoption cases. Just before Katrina, to accommodate an officemate's bad back, she had moved her records into the lowest file drawers. "The storm took everything," she says. "Twenty-six years of my work. So I just kind of kissed it all good-bye. I said to myself, this is just meant to be a wonderful memory. And then we were so busy with the crisis unit, I invested all of myself in that." **M**

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