Op-Ed: And the librarians shall lead them; Big convention brings a tourist-starved city back to life

New Orleans Times-Picayune

June 27, 2006

By Chris Rose

I don't think I'm quite ready to climb to the top of the Superdome and scream "We're BACK, baby!" But as harbingers of recovery go, the American Library Association convention this weekend was a serious step in the right direction.

I walked the Convention Center aisles for four days and noted this: I have probably covered 100 conventions in this building over the years and the difference in appearance between this one and all the others was . . . nothing.

It was simply a big, splashy convention with all the proper trappings: High-tech displays, A-list speakers, big-name entertainment and lots of sore feet and sleepy eyes.

I walked down Bourbon Street on Saturday night to get a feel for the revelry of the crowd after their workday was done, and the difference between this gang -- the first major post-Katrina convivium -- and all the other
convention crowds I have seen out here over the years was . . . nothing.

It looked, sounded, felt (and smelled) like Bourbon Street. For better or worse.

A friend of mine passed on to me a story from the Windsor Court Hotel, where, one night, a group of drunken librarians raced up and down the hallways in a juvenile thrall in the wee hours of the morning, raising a holy ruckus.

I don't mean to read too much into this event, but it's a sign that New Orleans is ready to be, once again, New Orleans when drunken librarians in relax-fit jeans and plaid shirts cavort in the halls of fancy hotels.

It's one small (wobbly) step for man, one giant step for New Orleans.

Before I get angry mail from the more staid members of the library community, I should note that a "library conference" doesn't necessarily mean that all of the attendees are actual "librarians." The Windsor Court hooligans could easily have been representatives of the Yale University Press, Random House or the booth managers from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary exhibit.
Drunken dictionary salesmen rule!

In any case, the point is this: I have spent much of the past 20 years with a conflicting sentiment in my head. Happy that conventioneers come to our town and booze it up and barter for beads on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams, but also wishing they would all just go away and leave New Orleans to New Orleanians.

Obviously, I feel that way no more. New Orleans has been left to New Orleanians for 10 months now and the fact is, it's been pretty damn lonely around here. Way too quiet.

It was so good to see all those name-tag-wearing-wanderers from across the heartland here in our city, whether they were shooting blue goo down their throats at Coyote Ugly or buying hot sauce in the French Market or browsing the aisles at Beckham's Book Shop in the Quarter.

They were here. They got their work done. They had a great time. And nobody got shot.

At the restaurant hospitality booth inside the Convention Center, I witnessed frustrated visitors negotiating with the volunteers behind the booth who bore the sad news that the restaurant they were trying to get
reservations for was absolutely booked for the night.

In the visitors' disappointment, I cheered. No available seats at Emeril's, Dickie Brennan's, Bayona. What a beautiful thing.

The Convention Center staffers and volunteers were constantly thanking the conventioneers as they walked in the building, and the import of this event was lost on no one.

Star Andrews, a librarian at Denison University in Granville, Ohio, was registering for the convention when the registrar went to pieces thanking her just for coming here and therefore she went to pieces also and everyone on both sides of the registration desk went to pieces and it's all just . . . love.

"People have been falling all over themselves thanking us," Andrews said. "Everywhere I have gone, someone has opened the door for me and said, 'Thank you for being here.'"

Judith Paquette, here from San Francisco, said: "It started for me with the airport shuttle bus driver who stood up and thanked us all just for being here. It just blew me away. It has been wonderful. Wonderful, but a little heartbreaking."
Indeed. Legions of the conference attendees found their way out into the community, either by tour bus or by other means, either to bear witness to the destruction or, in many cases, to visit local libraries and roll up their sleeves and get down and dirty in the moldy books for an afternoon and get our town back on its feet.

A friend of mine worked the New Orleans Public Library booth at the Convention Center for 90 minutes Sunday afternoon and reported that passersby put about $1,500 in the donation jar just in that small window of time.

Lyn Teeters is a video engineer who used to work the Convention Center every week here in New Orleans, setting up the rigs for big-money exhibitors. He lives in Plano, Texas, now.

He told me: "There are hardly any high-end engineers in New Orleans anymore; everyone is spread out all over -- wherever the work is. But we all got word about this convention and we flew in from all over the country -- a lot of us at our own expense -- to do this. Failure was not an option. We've got to get this thing jump-started."

And jump-started we are. A step in the right direction every bit as
meaningful as Mardi Gras and Jazzfest.

To the engineers and the scores of hospitality employees and volunteers who swarmed the Convention Center and bombarded the visitors with kindness and courtesy, I salute you. You represented well.

Maybe we got a little too misty-eyed -- I must confess to my own verklempt moments in the company of fellow conventioneers over the weekend -- and I'm sure they all think we're nuts but then again, we are nuts.

Nuts for living here. Nuts for loving here. So nuts to them. Go tell the world: We can do this.