Roots and WINGS

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

WE LIKE TO TALK ABOUT "ROOTS AND WINGS"—how we invest in a new idea, help it take root and grow, see it take off on its own. Enduring programs with impact are a source of pride in a job well done.

Then, we think, our work here is finished.

We move on, time passes, memories fade, and stories of struggle and success take a back shelf in the archives. Until something really big happens.

Flash back to Katrina. New Orleans. Day two. Levees are breached. Most of the city is under deep water.

Tens of thousands of adults and children are stranded in attics, on rooftops, in the stairwells of flooded-out hospitals and shelters, in the vast, suddenly venomous spaces of the Superdome and Convention Center.

The rest of the country watches, shocked and helpless, as an epic catastrophe unfolds on television. The public, political and logistical infrastructures we take for granted have failed on a cataclysmic scale. No one is in charge.

Before our eyes, masses of people are fighting to survive on their own. Well, almost on their own.

From a thousand feet up, a helicopter's nose-mounted video camera zooms in on a teal-on-white Ford F-350 turbo diesel V8 TraumaHawk ambulance surging through an unbroken inland sea of ocean-blue water, wheel wells awash, a widening white wake streaming behind.

The chopper circles for a closer shot. Painted on the rear door panels, just above the bumper tread plate, are the blood-red letters: Acadian Ambulance.

Back in Princeton, N.J., someone asks, "Don't we know them?" Sure we do.

More than a generation ago we awarded our first ever demonstration grant to a young entrepreneur in Lafayette, La. Richard Zuschlag had just formed Acadian

Ambulance to fill the void left when the local undertaker stopped using the mortuary's hearse to haul patients in need of care.

Zuschlag was a Westinghouse space and defense data expert sent down from Pennsylvania to help Lafayette's hospital update its communications capacity. Here, just over two hours west of New Orleans, he fell in love with a local Cajun girl and never left.

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When he saw the need for an ambulance service, he jumped at the chance to start his own business. That's where we came in.

This was the early 1970s. We were so new as a national philanthropy—no longer one focused on New Brunswick and Central N.J.—we quite literally were looking for opportunities sized large enough to fit our charter and our ambitions.

We didn't have far to look. The National Academy of Sciences had just declared trauma "the neglected disease of modern society." In fact, trauma was the leading cause of death between infancy and adults in their late 30s.

The reason? No one had two-way radios. Rescue workers at the scene couldn't talk to the hospital or their own headquarters. Trauma victims received little or no care before being wheeled into emergency rooms where doctors and nurses had no idea they were on the way. Tens of thousands of lives were being lost every year.

The country's first responders badly needed unified regional emergency communications, plus a universal 911 phone number for people to call for help in the first place.

However, parochial political interests, state and county bureaucratic fiefdoms and a lack of funding were formidable barriers. And even though President Nixon himself was calling for a national 911 system, the notion was far more concept than reality.

The high cost of equipment and pay-phone conversion limited local 911 service to such widely scattered places as Haleyville, Ala; Nome, Alaska; Huntington, Ind; and Puyallup, Wash. Other communities had few incentives to follow suit.

The bottom line: Government was talking but not acting, and neither the mainstream telephone industry nor Main Street America was paying attention.

That all changed with "Emergency!," one of TV's first reality-based shows, broadcast by NBC Saturday nights at 8 p.m. If you weren't watching Archie Bunker, you probably were tuned in to "Emergency!"

Created by Jack Webb of "Dragnet" fame, the action drama made instant heroes of fictional Los Angeles County Rescue Squad 51—and elevated "paramedic" into a household word.

Suddenly, the public and the news media said, "Well, sure," emergency response was a critical public priority for every hometown.

When "Emergency!" went on the air in January 1972, only 12 paramedic units existed in the entire country. But then the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) spent the equivalent of $65 million in today's dollars to create a real-world national 911 emergency medical-response system.

Four years later a paramedic unit was stationed with 10 minutes of at least 50 percent of the American population. Talk about life imitating art!

Here's how it happened: David Rogers, dean of Johns Hopkins medical school, had just become the national Foundation's first president. A bold, politically savvy visionary, Rogers saw great opportunity in the convergence of national needs, social climate, public support and federal interest in emergency response.

He assigned one of our young, prototypical staffers, Bob Blendon (sweater vest, horn-rimmed glasses, frighteningly prolific), to come up with a program that would have a "catalytic effect" on emergency health services nationwide.

We were still crowded into the cramped clapboard house on Livingston Avenue in New Brunswick, N.J. It was there that Bob gathered a group of colleagues, outside experts (including Blair Sadler, who came to RWJF to head up the program), and National Academy policy wonks who designed the rough schematic for what became our modern 911 emergency medical system.

They put in long hours. But Saturday nights, everyone stayed home to watch "Emergency!"

With a stroke of pragmatic brilliance, the team figured out how to persuade local power brokers into cooperating regionally: We'll put up the cash for the communications systems, we told them, if you agree to collaborate with your traditional competitors.

The team also correctly predicted that once they built an emergency medical system, 911 would soon follow.

The carrot worked. Fire departments, police departments, hospitals, physician offices and ambulance services finally could talk to each other. Thus was born RWJF's first coalition of "strange bedfellows."

We moved quickly, before anyone could change their minds. By the time "Emergency!" ended its second season, we announced grants to 44 communities in 32 states. And the very first one was to Richard Zuschlag's two-vehicle Acadian Ambulance Service.

Long afterward, but well before Katrina, Zuschlag recalled: "We used that seed money to begin developing the most sophisticated emergency communications system in the world.

"Half the money went to fund radios at the hospitals. With the rest of the money we put radios in the ambulances and developed a dispatch center. Eventually it became a 911 system."

Always worried that the system would go down, Zuschlag over the years spread a network of 18 500-foot communications towers across 24,000 square miles of Louisiana bayous, swamps and remote parishes, backed up by satellite phones, wireless computer links and redundant hardware systems.

His obsessiveness paid off. After Katrina hit, with phones and telecommunications down and government stumbling in the dark, the calming monotone of Acadian's dispatchers was the only sound of help and assurance across southern Louisiana and into Mississippi.

Back to Katrina, day two. It is the afternoon of Tuesday, August 30, 2006. Another levee has broken. The mayor says the pumps are about to cut out for good. A call goes out for anyone with a boat to join an ad hoc rescue armada.

Out where the flood has already wiped out familiar features of the terrain, the Acadian crew can't hear the circling chopper over the noise of the rising water pounding the chassis. But they are linked by satellite phone and two-way radio to Acadian's high-tech communications center six parishes to the west in Lafayette.

Richard Zuschlag is directing operations from his NORAD-like command bunker. Banks of overhead televisions and rows of computer screens light up the dozens of men and women who quietly, but urgently, are speaking into their headsets. GPS tracking tells them the exact location of the on-screen ambulance.

For 10 straight days and nights these command communicators coordinated 186 ambulances, six Air Med choppers and a flotilla of commandeered boats in an epic evacuation as one of America's most spectacular cities drowned.

Zuschlag later says, "I've never been through so much trauma."

His team deployed medics to hospital rooftops, guided hundreds of rescue chopper flights, sent first-aid staff into the Superdome and coordinated a triage center out on Interstate 10.

Acadia's medics bulldozed helipads out of hospital front lawns, converted empty 18-wheelers into evacuation ambulances (each could hold 68 patients) and packed newborn babies into cardboard boxes to squeeze more of them into the helicopters.

Acadian, the *New York Times* said, was a "lonely island of competence."

Five days after Acadian dispatched its first Katrina rescue team, government troops finally moved in to help clear out the hospitals.

"Most people gave up because it was the biggest nightmare they'd ever seen," Zuschlag told *Inc.* magazine. "But my people are great doers and wouldn't take no for an answer."

That sounds just like the Richard we met in 1973 when we helped Acadian and the rest of the country put down their EMS roots. And that helicopter overhead—well, that was Acadian's, too.

One more thing: To see what it was like at the beginning, tune in WBXH (Channel 39) in Baton Rouge at 9 a.m. each weekday. Reruns of "Emergency!" are still showing.

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–Richard Zuschlag

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