

The Genius Issue

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MAN AT HIS BEST

America's Best & Brightest

Also:

THE WORLD'S
HARDEST QUIZ
(PG. 174)

GENE JOCKEYS
FLU GURUS
NUCLEAR MAVERICKS
ROGUE PIANISTS
THE NEXT
GREAT BLOND
& 25 OTHERS WHO
ARE SAVING OUR
WORLD

✓ FLYING
WINDMILLS
& THE OTHER
INVENTIONS
OF THE YEAR

+ 47 GENIUS
GIFT IDEAS



↑
And...
THE VANDAL
OF THE YEAR
(PG. 198)



Clinton

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL MAN IN THE WORLD STARTS
GETTING HIS HANDS DIRTY

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ty's emergency-management coordinator, and tell him the ball was rolling. While Eckels worked to get the Dome ready, Gutierrez pulled in the Red Cross, which immediately began rounding up staff and tens of thousands of cots and blankets.

Showered and shaved, Eckels then set out to find Shea Guinn, president of SMG-Reliant Park, which operates both the Astrodome and the Superdome. Guinn had recently moved, and his phone number had changed, so the judge drove the dark streets until he found the new address. Guinn's wife answered the door in a T-shirt and severe bed head, a little embarrassed. Guinn stumbled downstairs in a pair of sweatpants. "Shea, get the Dome ready," the judge told him. "They're coming tonight."

The crumbling old house of Earl Campbell and Nolan Ryan hadn't been used for much of anything in nearly a year. Plumbing in old locker-room showers had to be flushed of brown, rusty water; phones and computers were feverishly installed; and a caterer was contracted to begin preparing food for an entire city.

At daybreak, in a meeting at Transtar, Eckels and Houston mayor Bill White told George Masi, chief operating officer of the county's hospital district, to get ready for a crush of sick evacuees. "Prepare a significant humanitarian mission," Eckels told Masi, who commandeered a hundred thousand square feet of the Reliant Arena adjacent to the Dome and began piecing together what would become known as Katrina Clinic, a state-of-the-art improvised facility that would later inspire Hillary Clinton to pronounce it a model to be studied for years to come. In less than twenty-four hours, Masi and his staff constructed a fully functional hospital that included general-surgery, prenatal, pediatric, and mental-health units, where patients could get X rays, vaccinations, new eyeglasses, and even wisdom teeth pulled.

The first bus arrived at 10:30 that night, driven by twenty-year-old Jabbar Gibson, who'd commandeered the vehicle from a school yard, filled it with neighbors, and driven it straight to Houston. He'd never driven a bus in his life. Dozens of buses followed unannounced, filled with dehydrated and sickly people with diarrhea from ingesting floodwater, weak and fragile elderly, drug addicts in advanced states of withdrawal, and everyone else who'd been plucked from rooftops or saved in rubber rafts, inflatable kiddie pools, and floating hot tubs.

Eckels and his staff had no idea how many evacuees to expect. Communications with Louisiana had been severed by the storm, and a team of Texas state troopers sent to New Orleans to escort the orderly evacuation buses called back completely overwhelmed, saying the entire Superdome was already on its way and that the Louisiana troopers expected to assist them had never shown up. Thousands poured into Houston throughout that night, desperate and starving.

By early the next morning, the Houston team had managed to turn the ramshackle Astrodome and the Reliant Park complex into a sprawling city of twenty-three thousand refugees, with another four thousand at the nearby George R. Brown Convention Center.

Over the next twenty-five days, another estimated 150,000 poured into Houston. Eckels's staff and sixty thousand volunteers fed and clothed the haggard masses, found them jobs and federal aid, offered counseling, and reunited families. Weddings were conducted on the floor of the Dome, with the judge officiating one himself. People fell in love, and babies were born. And in less than a month, the city had shuttled nearly all of them into hotels, coordinated free transport to cities of relatives, or found them apartments or homes. While the federal government was denounced for being largely inept in responding to the Katrina disaster, Eckels and White over in Houston were an island of com-

Toward a Zombie-Free America

THE POWERFUL IDEA BEHIND ROADTRIP NATION

If you've ever wondered whether an eight-by-eight office—or worse, a cubicle—is the finest place to spend the bulk of your time on earth, then Mike Marriner, Nathan Gebhard, and Brian McAllister would like a word with you. Their group, Roadtrip Nation, aims to prove that making a living does not have to mean forfeiting your life.

"We were the oldest twenty-three-year-olds in the world," Marriner says, recalling the day when the three longtime friends with degrees from Pepperdine realized that they were about to embark on careers they detested. (Marriner graduated pre-med, Gebhard was headed to Arthur Andersen, and McAllister planned to join the family business: a Burbank landfill.) "I don't know if you want to call it an epiphany or what," Marriner recalls, "but we thought, Maybe we just need to get out of here for a while." And so they did.

Maxing out a fistful of credit cards, they bought a decrepit thirty-one-foot RV with a tendency to belch fire, painted it lime green, and hit the road. Their purpose? To meet people who'd created interesting lives apart from the mainstream, doing what they loved.

"We wanted to know, how did they escape?" McAllister says. Charting a seventeen-thousand-mile, three-month odyssey across the country, the RV dropped in on eighty-two self-made individuals, from filmmaker Errol Morris to Sandra Day O'Connor to a mechanic named Doc. (They filmed the interviews for an eventual documentary.) Along the way, they stopped at universities and recruited others to come along. RTN struck a chord; it wasn't unusual for frustrated students to burst into tears when they heard about the group's mission.

Today, four years later, there are four green RVs crisscrossing North America, helmed by teams of students; a PBS series produced from RTN's new HQ in Newport Beach, California; a series of books and documentaries; and a Web site and blogging hub. And somewhat ironically, considering that one of the group's tenets is Benjamin Franklin's idea that all education is self-education, colleges have embraced them. Along with promoting lectures and screen-



• The wanderers, clockwise from top: McAllister, Gebhard, and Marriner.

ings of their documentaries, career centers on a hundred campuses recruit students for the road trips. What started as simple curiosity has become a full-on grassroots movement with a stunningly resonant message: The world doesn't need more zombies.

—EMMA LAREQUIN

