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When Disaster Strikes

FSU alumnus Lee Clarke has earned a growing national reputation as an authority on what really happens in the wake of a natural or man-made catastrophe

By Tom Nugent

When the devastating Japan earthquake exploded onto the world's front pages on March 11, Lee Clarke (B.S. '79) knew that his telephone would soon be ringing off the hook as reporters from all across the United States sought his opinion on the potential impact of the worst catastrophe to strike Japan since World War II.

During more than 20 years of researching and writing several high-profile books about some of the most horrific disasters in recent memory, the 54-year-old Rutgers University sociology professor, who was recently named a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, has earned a growing national reputation as an authority on what really happens in the wake of a natural or man-made catastrophe.

Ask nationally renowned sociologist Lee Clarke what it's like to conduct scientific research at the scene of a major disaster, and he'll respond by telling you about the three weeks he spent in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Clarke uncovered some surprisingly positive aspects of the trag

edy that struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005.

For starters, the veteran disaster specialist found himself listening to numerous stories about a heroic band of ordinary citizens from rural Louisiana who dropped everything they were doing at the time of the hurricane and rushed to help New Orleans citizens escape from the deadly floodwaters.

"They were just regular guys, but most of them happened to own boats of one kind or another, since they lived way back in the bayous," says Clarke. "Well, what happened was



Lee Clarke (B.S. '79) surveys the havoc wreaked on a New Orleans neighborhood by Hurricane Katrina. Photo by Robert Gramling

that they *self-organized*. They got together and worked out a plan ... and then they drove to New Orleans in order to save people. And I found that behavior really interesting, to say the least."

For Clarke, the daring exploits of the group, which came to be known as the Cajun Flotilla, would provide proof for one of his best-known theories: the idea that most ordinary citizens, far from "panicking" during disasters and then rushing about in chaotic helplessness, are surprisingly good at organizing themselves and then helping each other to overcome the negative effects of flood, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes and other natural catastrophes.

According to the independent-minded Clarke, in fact, the real danger in a major disaster isn't that the people involved will panic and behave crazily. It's that the government officials who are supposed to be helping them will lose *their* cool and start compounding the catastrophe by trying to implement irrational, unrealistic strategies that can't possibly work.

Describing how this "Elite Panic" (a term coined by Clarke and his colleague Caron Chess) often takes place in disaster zones, the sociologist noted that when The Cajun Flotilla arrived in the Big Easy to help evacuate the swamped citizenry, local and federal officials at first tried to stop them from carrying out their waterborne rescues.

"That was truly amazing to me," says the former FSU sociology major. "I mean, think about it: Here you had a bunch of government officials who basically didn't trust the people they were supposed to be helping. And then, even though their *own* response to the disaster was notoriously ineffective in many ways — we all remember the early problems with food distribution and the temporary FEMA trailers — they were determined to prevent local citizens from joining the rescue effort!"

Controversial Opinions ... Supported By First-Rate Scholarship

While publishing three highly influential books on how individuals and organizations respond to major disasters (including the widely-praised *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination*, University of Chicago Press), Lee Clarke has spent more than two decades trying to understand the social dynamics that determine how people and governments respond to catastrophe.



Photo by Nick Romanenko

A frequent contributor to publications that range from *The Atlantic* to *The Washington Post* and the (Newark, N.J.) *Star-Ledger*, Clarke now ranks as one of America's most authoritative experts on such catastrophic events as the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Hurricane Katrina and last summer's BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Clarke is a fierce critic of what he famously describes as the "fantasy planning documents" produced by government officials and executives who don't really understand how humans actually react in disasters. He has sparked controversy in the past by insisting that to plan effectively for catastrophe, we need to spend lots of time imagining "the very worst things that can happen" instead of trying to hide from them by pretending that they could never

take place.

In spite of the controversy that his original thinking often creates, however, most experts in his field readily concede that his scholarship is first-rate and that his influence in the world of disaster studies is growing rapidly.

Inspired By The "Electrifying" Lew Rhodes

Raised in the small, South Florida town of Belle Glade (located at the southern tip of Lake Okeechobee), Lee Clarke was the son of a hard-working hospital administrator and a mother who taught math in the public schools while endlessly singing the praises of "good books and a university education."

By the time Clarke and his buddy Tim Prescott (B.S. '79) finished high school and set sail for Tallahassee, they were weary of small town life and "fired up about heading off into the big, grown-up world of a state university.

Prescott, today a successful investment counselor in South Florida, remembers Clarke as "a guy with a great sense of humor, but also very intense. Right from the start, you could see that he was determined to get everything he could out of college. I'm not surprised that he's gone as far as he has."

After struggling a bit during his first semester on campus, Clarke wound up taking a sociology course from the legendary Professor Lew Rhodes.

"He was absolutely electrifying," says the Rutgers luminary today. "Rhodes was so passionate, when he talked about how society worked, that I could hardly believe it. I used to look at him in class and think: 'I want to be *that* guy.' From that point on, I vowed that I was going to become a sociology professor, and that's what finally happened."

Acting on the advice of another "inspiring mentor" (Sociology Professor Graham Kinlock, now Emeritus), Clarke headed off to Stony Brook University to work on a Ph.D. By the late 1980s, with his doctorate in hand, he had already signed on as a teacher/researcher at Rutgers, and he's been there ever since.

These days, the elegantly bearded scholar spends his days working on an endless stream of journal articles and research projects, while also teaching courses and turning out a new book every four or five years. Married to fellow Rutgers sociology professor Pat Roos (an expert on gender and work issues) and the father of a 21-year-old son who's now studying biology at Dickinson College, Lee Clarke says he's "having more fun than ever" as an original thinker who loves to come up with gadfly theories that are guaranteed to kick the "conventional wisdom" about disasters right smack in the seat of its pants.

When the telephone rings in the Clarke household in Metuchen, N.J. these days, the caller will often be a national reporter who wants to hear Lee's "take" on the recent tragedy in Japan. Instead of feeding the journalist a typical "ain't it awful?" sound bite, however, Clarke will usually start talking about how "nature isn't entirely to blame for what happened.

"If you look carefully at what really occurred," he says, "you'll soon discover that the earthquake caused relatively few deaths. The real tragedy was caused mostly by the tsunami that followed. And when you consider that fact, you start to realize that human decision-making contributed heavily to the catastrophe.

"Those Japanese engineers and business executives chose to put six nuclear reactors at the very edge of the ocean — without ever stopping to imagine that the water might flood over some day, if an earthquake ever occurred. In my view, that was thoughtless pride, and it

immensely complicated the disaster that ensued.

"As a sociologist, that's the kind of insight that endlessly fascinates me, because it suggests that the key to avoiding (or at least minimizing) these kinds of catastrophes is to better understand the social forces at work in them."

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