



KEN BENNETT

Bob Johnson: Back and ready to do business.

Bob Johnson ('69)

Rounding the Bend

Even from the depths, salvation is possible, as the resurrection and ascension of the New Orleans Convention Center demonstrates.

STANDING ON A

PEDESTRIAN WAY with a panoramic vista of the Mississippi River before him, Bob Johnson ('69) was feeling exceptionally buoyant. Tim Duncan ('97) and Chris Paul ('07) would be squaring off at the New Orleans Arena that evening with Wake Forest hoops and ACC broadcasting icon Gil McGregor ('71) at the mike. What more could the heart of a dyed-in-the-wool Deacon fan desire?

Bob had another reason for floating a bit that March morning. The Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, of which he is president and general manager, is back in a big way with blockbuster convention bookings and expansion plans barely two-and-a-half years after it had been a scene that Hieronymus Bosch could not have conceived.

Thirteen months earlier, the native of Hampton, Virginia, had returned to the city he had grown to love after eleven years of professional exile, hoping in some way to help it get off its knees. In a happy sequence of serendipitous

circumstances, he was offered an opportunity to parlay his formidable talents and experience in the exhibition and convention industry into the top post at perhaps the city's most important generator of visitor revenue, upon which it so desperately depends.

So how's it going? Water is a ubiquitous metaphor in New Orleans, and Bob has one at the ready for where he is standing, at the arc of the river's crescent. "We are rounding the bend," he says, ebulliently and with obvious sincerity.

Bob, whose official class year is 1969 but who actually got his degree in 1970, went straight to work after college as event coordinator at the newly opened Benton Convention Center in Winston-Salem. Under the mentorship of Jim Dalrymple ('59), a former star running back for the Deacons who oversaw the city's sports and exhibition facilities for decades, Bob also acquired an array of experience at a range of other venues beside the convention center, including the

old Coliseum, Ernie Shore Field, and Bowman Gray Stadium.

In 1982, Bob left Winston-Salem to become the inaugural director of the new Lakefront Arena at the University of New Orleans. Three years later, he was appointed general manager of the Louisiana Superdome, the world's largest enclosed stadium and a repeat host of most of the country's premier sporting events, including the Super Bowl and The Final Four. In 1995, his employer, SMG, the world's largest manager of convention centers, theaters, stadiums, and arenas, transferred him to corporate headquarters in Philadelphia, where he remained until his retirement in late 2006.

"Originally we were going to retire to a golf course some place, but we loved New Orleans so much," he says. "Our daughter was in architecture school at Tulane and would be part of the first post-Katrina graduating class [in spring 2007]. And I think I was experiencing some survivor's guilt about not having gone through the hurricane and wanted to be part of the rebuilding effort. So we bought a house here and moved back in February with nothing to do."

His idleness was short-lived. A month later, Jimmie D. Fore, who had served as president and general manager of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center since 1991, retired. "[Convention center authority president] Warren Reuther was an old colleague, and we talked," Bob recalls. "[Convention] bookings had dropped off significantly [in the hurricane's wake], and he said he wanted it to become active in helping the city's tourism-hospitality industry to recover." It was the chance to be of service to New Orleans that Bob had been looking for, and in September, he was appointed to succeed Fore.

AGAINST the **WIND**

Along with the Superdome, the convention center was one of two designated refuge centers for people who were stranded in the city in the aftermath of the hurricane, but it soon degraded into a hellish cauldron of violence, chaos, and deprivation of basic necessities. “The building sustained significant damage at the hands of its guests,” Bob notes. “The city received \$62 million to renovate it, but that did not compensate for the loss of business. Direct cancellations [of conventions] as a result of the hurricane resulted in a loss of 3 million room-nights, which translates into \$3 billion in economic activity for our industry.”

Bob and his staff set about the daunting but critical task of rebranding the city as a convention destination. “We had to overcome the image America had of New Orleans from television and the fears [of professional association officers who select their convention sites] of what would happen if another hurricane hit during

their meeting,” he says. “What’s helped us more than anything are the major conventions we hosted [over the past year] that came off without a hitch. The International Association of Chiefs of Police, the American Society of Ophthalmologists, the American Heart Association, the Health Information Management Systems Society ... they are our heroes because they trusted us. It showed others that we hadn’t fallen flat.

“The hotels took advantage of the down time [after the hurricane] to refresh themselves,” he goes on. “More restaurants are opening now than before the storm, the tourism infrastructure is back up and running at full speed, and all the major sports events the city has hosted since the first of the year—the BCS Championship game and NBA All-Star Game in particular—have shown the country that we’re back and ready to do business.”

One surprisingly effective selling point in drawing conventions to the city, he says, is the opportunity

to volunteer in the recovery effort. “[Conventioners] have donated hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours to recovery projects since the hurricane,” he says. “Rather than play golf, they spend their off time working with Habitat for Humanity or a similar relief organization. Whereas a year ago we’d hear [from prospective groups], ‘You poor people,’ now we’re hearing, ‘Do you have any dates in 2012 or 2013?’”

With 1.1 million square feet of exhibition space, the convention center is one of the nation’s largest and busiest. But Bob and his board have bigger things in the works. “We are planning an expansion with modern architecture that will show forward thinking,” he says. “As one moves upriver, the progression will be from the old New Orleans to the new.

“There’s still a lot of recovery work to be done in the city,” he adds. “But now, for the first time, we’re starting to think that Katrina is history. We’re looking to the future.”



PHOTO BY TED JACKSON / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

John Nemeth works to get his yard in shape on Hay Place, just at the mouth of the 17th Street Canal breach, while his neighbor's house sits in limbo.