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A City's Stragglers Depend on Kindness Of Dr. Brobson Lutz

Man About French Quarter
Moves Bodies, Treats Ills;
Giving Viagra to the Cops

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 Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
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NEW ORLEANS -- Mike Lala was siphoning gas from his white SUV to his green pickup when the chest pains came on. He dropped his pistol, staggered back to his restaurant, climbed three flights of stairs and died.

And that's where he stayed, for a long, sultry weekend, while his girlfriend, her son, eight dogs and 15 cats lived on in the French Quarter restaurant where they had taken refuge from the storm. His girlfriend called the police, but the police said only the Federal Emergency Management Agency could move a body.



Brobson Lutz

Then Brobson Lutz came along. Dr. Lutz had been the city's health director for 12 years and is currently the assistant coroner for infectious diseases, making him a body catcher of sorts, able to move corpses federal officials haven't reached. Though crawling with police and emergency responders, New Orleans has been unable to keep up with the dead bodies. Newspapers are full of stories of cadavers washed up in the flood that sit unceremoniously for days and now weeks before officials get around to removing them.

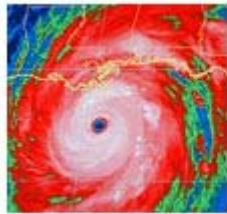
"You take care of the living by taking care of the dead," Dr. Lutz said after removing Mr. Lala's body.

With no power or gas, with garbage piled up in the streets and a much reduced population, New Orleans seems to have reverted to the mid-1800s. And Dr. Lutz, 58 years old, seems to have followed the city back in time as the local doctor, coroner, pharmacist and psychiatrist -- all rolled into one -- to a host of dazed denizens of the

French Quarter.

For a shingle, he has strung up a white banner across his French Quarter residential compound -- which includes the former home of playwright Tennessee Williams -- and spray-painted "French Quarter Health Department in Exile" in black letters. He tells all comers that the city isn't the cesspool of disease the government says. To prove it, he drinks the supposedly tainted tap water himself.

As he has done for many years, Dr. Lutz continues to maintain a private medical practice. The city also made him assistant coroner, an honorary post that pays no salary but comes, he says, with "a dinky little badge." The badge provides just enough authority for Dr. Lutz to see that he gets what he wants. To retrieve the body of Mr. Lala, for instance, Dr. Lutz enlisted the aid of three otherwise idle New Jersey firemen, who wrapped Mr. Lala's body and took it to Dr. Lutz's Uptown office, where it sat for a day more in his steamy examination room.



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Short, balding and sunny, with a thick Southern accent and a collection of outrageous spectacles that would make Elton John blush, Dr. Lutz is a well-known figure here, both for his public position and because he had long delivered health-related reports on WWL-TV. In the French Quarter, he's something of a bon vivant, often seen walking the streets in a seersucker suit and dining at Antoine's Restaurant and Galatoire's,

where he is occasionally called upon to attend to patrons who have collapsed.

"You get called on at Antoine's and they pick up your check and pay the next one when you come back," Dr. Lutz says. "At Galatoire's, it's just free drinks."

After evacuating to Alabama before the storm hit, Dr. Lutz says he nursed a broken heart and returned two days later to clean up and help. At first, he says, he used his skills as a onetime student intern for the New York medical examiner to help neighbors clear rotting meat from their putrid refrigerators.

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The plodding pace of body retrieval gave him darker work to do. Operating with a gang of California paramedics who had holed up in a shotgun house a block down from his compound, Dr. Lutz became a neighborhood do-gooder, collecting bodies, dispensing medicines and taking canned peas to semi-delirious neighbors. The paramedics cook the communal meals, fetch the gasoline and embark on sundry expeditions directed by the man they simply call "Doc."

Providing help requires medical supplies, which are plentiful if one knows where to look. From FEMA officials handing out supplies, the California paramedics got a case of tetanus shots preloaded into syringes and turned to Dr. Lutz to scrounge needles. Dr. Lutz quickly headed to a looted Walgreen's drugstore on the West Bank of the Mississippi.

Dr. Lutz says he arrived to find the parking lot jammed with city cops trying to get prescriptions filled for themselves before going on paid leaves the city had awarded them. Manning the prescription desk was the Fourth District's narcotics chief. Because of his street knowledge of the drug trade, he seemed more qualified than anybody else around to dispense medications.

Dr. Lutz says he jumped in to help. He managed to fill many of the prescriptions (for depression, diabetes and asthma) by making generic substitutions. "We had more prescriptions for Viagra and Levitra and Cialis that we could handle," he says.

In gratitude, the narcotics chief presented Dr. Lutz and the paramedics with a shopping cart, which they quickly filled with hypodermic needles, bandages, rubbing alcohol and swabs. On the way out, Dr. Lutz snared 300 doses of antibiotics for his own in-house pharmacy in the Quarter.

After treating patients in the morning, Dr. Lutz often puts on a suit in the afternoon, hops on his bicycle and makes the rounds of the two French Quarter watering holes that have stayed open through the disaster -- Molly's at the Market and Johnny White's Sports Bar and Grill.

"Bartenders are the informal group leaders of the community," Dr. Lutz says. "If the bartenders know you, everyone knows you."

Sometimes, he takes a few paramedics, who dispense personal hygiene products to the largely unwashed and drunken crowd that congregates at the darkened and grubby establishments. Johnny White's openly flouts the city's dusk-to-dawn curfew, with a little help. The Army's 82nd Airborne routinely delivers the ice needed to keep beer and highballs cold.

At Johnny White's, Dr. Lutz ran into a sloshed boardinghouse operator with a bad abscess on her arm. The woman had once heard that people taking penicillin shouldn't be drinking alcohol, so she told Dr. Lutz that she was allergic to the drug. Dr. Lutz gave her another antibiotic and told her she could keep ordering drinks.

The same afternoon brought a crisis of a different sort. An evacuee had called saying he had heard that his guesthouse had been broken into. Dr. Lutz sped off to his house, returning with a huge chrome revolver he had borrowed. Dr. Lutz wasn't sure he could shoot it -- "it looks like a cowboy gun," he said. He formed a quick

posse with a fireman and a skinny paramedic.

The house had indeed been entered and a few possessions were scattered about. Not finding any intruders, the fireman nailed the house down with wooden boards. Dr. Lutz labored over a hand-lettered sign and then pounded it into the front door with a four-inch nail. "Cleared by Sheriff Lutz," the sign said.

One evening earlier this week, Dr. Lutz and two paramedics decided to pay a visit to Mike Lala's girlfriend, Connie, and her son, worried the two would slide into deep depression while living in the darkened restaurant with their eight dogs and 15 cats. "I bet what Connie would really like is a cold beer," Dr. Lutz said.

Grabbing two Coors Light longnecks and a carton of cold milk, Dr. Lutz and two paramedics hopped in a California ambulance and made their way through the darkened streets of the Quarter to the Olde N'Awlins Cookery, where the two survivors remained.

Inside, the restaurant was lighted by scores of candles that used to decorate the tables. The place reeked of dogs and death as pets moved furtively through the shadows, flashes of snout and tail appearing in the flickering light.

Dr. Lutz sat at a courtyard table with Connie and Damion, her son, watching closely as the two struggled to string sentences together.

"Y'all need to get out in the fresh air more," Dr. Lutz declared, after listening for a bit.

Connie declined the beers but her eyes lit up at the carton of milk. "Cold milk was Mike's favorite drink," she said. "Well, that and Beefeater's."

Dr. Lutz nodded sagely. "Acid reflux," he said.

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