

like a nightmare

PROFILE OF KEVIN COGGIN,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT COAST TRANSIT AUTHORITY IN
GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI

Interview location: Bernie's Cajun Restaurant in Biloxi, Mississippi

How we got there: By car, on foot, and by trolley

In one word, he describes himself as "persistent."

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Kevin Coggin in 2016 (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

“On Friday, I go to bed, and the wind is about 110, 120 miles per hour—something that’s significant, but not something that’ll make you sit up straight in your chair,” recalls Kevin Coggin of the days before Hurricane Katrina. “I get up Saturday morning, and the damn thing’s [predicted] at 175 miles per hour. It puffed up to a killer. I sat up straight. I spit my coffee out.” >

trying to rebuild

As Executive Director of Coast Transit Authority in Biloxi, Mississippi, Kevin couldn't evacuate. He had to stay and ride out the storm. His job was to provide emergency transportation after a natural disaster. When residents lost their homes and cars, they were going to need a way to get to food, shelter, drinking water, and hospitals.

On Sunday, together with his wife, his daughter, and dogs, "We huddled up in the living room," he says. "Just listening to the gusts. The roof's creaking—krrrrr, krrr. The wind's blowing—shhhhh. House is shaking." He grabs the table and rattles it until the salt almost spills. He twists his hands like dinosaur claws. "It's like a nightmare. You're like, Stop, but it keeps blowing and blowing. Usually it's like one or two hours, but this one—you thought it'd never end."

When he says "usually," he is talking about previous hurricanes, and he's lived through a lot of them. He tends to speak of hurricanes like an extreme sports adventure, and he suggests experiencing a little one—definitely not a Katrina—at some point in my life. Before Katrina, Camille, in 1969, was the storm to end all storms. When Katrina struck on Sunday, August 28, 2005, "the eye passed



Biloxi Landscape in 2016 (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

in the daytime, at 11 o'clock," says Kevin. "Usually they come at night. I don't know why. I guess it's God's plan so you don't see it."

"So what time did you wake up Sunday?" I ask.

"You don't sleep," he says. "You stay up the whole night. Too many things can go wrong." Kevin lives on a hill above flood plain, but in the valley down below him, a cemetery was under six feet of water. At his house, Katrina knocked over trees, spit freshwater in windows, and buckled the bedroom ceiling. "I was feeling aggravated," says Kevin. "But when I saw that some people didn't have a house, it puts things in perspective real quick."

By Monday, Kevin was back at the office doing

damage control, and he wasn't alone. "We had employees come back the next day at work, wanting to put the company back together," he recalls, tapping his fingers on the table. "That was really touching." The front office at headquarters got two feet of water while the yard with the electric bus fleet sat in three feet. "Salt water with electric buses," he says, searching for the right words. "That's not a good thing."

The maintenance staff started changing oil in buses, and everyone pitched in to clean up the grounds as best they could. "Then you go out in the community and find out what they need you to do," says Kevin. "What we concentrated on in the immediacy of the storm is devising routes to get people to PODs—that's points of distribution—with food, clothes, water, medical help and to community centers that were set up for people that lost their homes." Coast Transit connected residents to what they needed.

One day Kevin answered a call from the mayor of Pascagoula, a nearby coastal town with a shipyard for the U.S. Navy. "Course they're on the water and got hammered by the hurricane," he says.

When residents lost their homes, they moved away. "It's a struggle. You're trying to rebuild, but you can't find people to do it. Nobody wants to live here." The mayor wanted to get the shipyard business, Mississippi's largest employer, back up and running, but his displaced employees needed a way to get to work. Kevin worked with the mayor to come up with the idea for a vanpool—transporting employees from home to work—which Coast Transit subsidized (and still does).

Because Coast Transit is a regional transportation

agency, "we really don't have a restricted geographic area," explains Kevin. "Typically, a transit system is owned or operated by a state or county. We're an independent public utility, a commission." Coast Transit could bring people to Mississippi to work from Louisiana, Florida, and Alabama. "We've got services operating in four states," says Kevin. Though he is proud of his agency's hand in rebuilding the Coastal community, he acknowledges one regret. "My key takeaway from Katrina—what I would advise someone else to do in the situation—is: hire a competent project manager," he says. "I didn't. I

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was looking at it from a taxpayer's perspective. Why would I hire someone to do what I can do? But it's too much. It took us a long time—a full ten years—to get the system back to where it was and growing, and we would've gotten there a lot sooner with a project manager."

Kevin and I are talking over lunch at Bernie's Cajun Restaurant in Biloxi, Mississippi about two miles from Coast Transit headquarters. Kevin is sitting with his back to the wall. "I like to face the door," he told me. "I learned that in the cowboy movies. Never sit with your back to the door."

For an appetizer, we are sharing boudin bites, a traditional Cajun sausage stuffed with crawfish and rice that is battered and fried. Kevin is also eating a cup of gumbo, which, he says, helps with his allergies and stuffed sinuses. Coughing after a bite, he says, "Phew! I don't know what they put in it, but it's pretty snappy." The waitress brings a dish of butter and a bowl of Saltines. I ask what the butter is for. "This is the South," replies Kevin. "You put butter on your crackers." I order a fried shrimp po'boy for my main course with a side of broccoli, which I correctly assume is not a common choice of side to accompany fried shrimp. "Most people get French fries," says Kevin. "I should take a picture."

Kevin is tall—maybe 6'5"—and slender. He talks in a lulling Southern drawl punctuated with an occasional curse word that has a charming effect. When I ask how he got started in transit, he says, "You want the short story or the long story?" The short version of the long story begins after he graduated from high school, when he got a job as a diesel mechanic for Detroit Diesel. The position had him traveling all over the Gulf, mostly in Louisiana, learning all about engines and customer service.

From there he moved to buses, working as a shop foreman for Hausman Bus Company,

which repaired and resold old Greyhounds. When Greyhound itself took over the company four years later, they closed the Gulfport branch where Kevin worked. That's when, in 1989, he heard about the opening at Coast Transit Authority. He was offered a position as director of the maintenance department, at a \$10,000 pay cut. "It was a gamble," he says, "but I saw it as an opportunity."

The executive director at the time took Kevin under his wing, recognizing he was as skilled in dealing with people as with bus parts. "He was a really smart businessman," recalls Kevin. "I started learning about regulatory compliance. I did all the high-end procurements, basically."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Well, to build a building or buy buses, you need a contract," he explains. "There's a lot of regulatory compliance associated with federal grants. This is before the internet, so I'd have to go down to the library and research the Federal Code of Regulation, which is very boring. Now it's a snap. Any research you wanna do, you just Google it and bam—it's there!"

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Kevin Coggin, running a triathlon with his daughter last year. (Photo used with permission by Kevin Coggin.)

From the executive director, Kevin also learned the importance of outside perspective. “He would say, ‘Always look at what other people are doing and steal their ideas,’” recalls Kevin, who admits he’s amended the lesson slightly with his own words. “So I like to get out frequently and see what other transit agencies are doing, and I like to have outside people come and look at what we’re doing and ask, ‘What can we do better? What do you recommend?’”

A string of executive directors followed the

first, Kevin explains, and the organization was headed on a steady downward trajectory in terms of finances, function, and reputation.

Kevin’s predecessor “wasn’t a numbers guy,” says Kevin. In 2003, the board of directors offered Kevin the job. “My wife actually cried when I went home and told her that I’d accepted,” he says, making sure that I understand the tears weren’t for joy. “It was a very critical time in the history of the company.” In fact, most of Kevin’s family and friends criticized his decision to lead

a transit agency in such dire straits. “But I saw it as a positive,” explains Kevin. “We were kind of at the bottom. I didn’t have big shoes to fill. I mean, I couldn’t make it any worse.”

The first thing Kevin did as executive director was to go out into the community, meeting with leaders of business, church, politics, and activism. At each meeting he repeated the refrain: “I know that the community isn’t happy with what we’re doing. I recognize that. I don’t have the fix to all the problems right now, but I know what the problems are.” His genuine and candid conversations, delivered in an apologetic and humble fashion, ingratiated Coast Transit back into the Gulf Coast. “That was really good for the community to hear,” Kevin observes. “That put a lot of faith in me, that I would admit we were wrong and that we were going to work with them.”

In his desire to have input in the narrative surrounding transit, Kevin called the local newspaper and set up a meeting with the

editorial board. “The newspaper was really throwing a lot of rocks at us,” he says, but reporters weren’t giving him an opportunity to tell the agency’s side. When he met with the board, he asked them to give him some time to fix the things he knew were broken. “I said, ‘Oh by the way, you guys have been writing these really bad articles about Coast Transit, and my office is literally up the street within walking distance, and I haven’t gotten a single phone call or visit.’” Following the meeting, the executive editor of the paper invited him to continue the conversation. “We came to a really good working understanding,” he says.

Though he regained the confidence of the community, he admits he had to learn a lesson about leadership of a large organization. “At first I wanted to be the most important person at that place,” he says, laughing at his own hubris. His objective to be necessary, powerful, and irreplaceable interfered with his personal life. “Because nobody in maintenance could make a decision without me, they were calling me 24/7. It was awful.” He learned that to run a successful business, he had to trust the staff he hired and give them the authority and the tools to reach their common goals.

Gradually, Kevin’s staff at Coast Transit began to put their faith in him, and the community followed suit. They were not wrong to believe in him. “We got it turned around,” he says, smiling proudly for a moment before his lips go flat. “Then, 2005.” He claps his hands with a loud smack. “Hurricane Katrina.”

Pointing to my po’boy, Kevin says, “Don’t let your shrimp get cold.” He inhales through his

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nostrils, happy that the spicy gumbo did the trick clearing out his sinuses. Now he's onto his main course, which is a salad with grilled shrimp. "I'm trying to eat clean this week," he says, in preparation for an upcoming triathlon in St. Pete. "Yeah, I'm racin' this weekend," he continues, "If you wonder how I stay so skinny with all this good Southern food around here." He folds a piece of lettuce on his fork. "I say racin', but I'm not competing," he says. "I'm participating."

"What's your best event?" I ask.

"In the triathlon?" he asks. "None, really." I laugh. "My strongest sport and the most enjoyable is running," he says. "It's spiritual. I call it cruise control. I just get in that run mode where I don't even know I'm running."

He started running four years ago, when his blood pressure was off the charts, and his weight registered 270 pounds. Katrina, Kevin explains, took her toll on him personally. "I was taking care of everybody else, and I let me go," he says, shaking his head. From the day the hurricane struck until Thanksgiving, Kevin didn't take a day off. He slept little and worked around the clock, and his health went down from there.

One of his Board Members, a woman named Gini, was an internationally-ranked triathlete in the over-65 bracket. At one of the Coast Transit board meetings in November, she challenged Kevin to run a 5K with her on New Year's Eve. Another senior board member, a retired Green Beret, pointed to Kevin and said, "If you do it, I'll do it."

Kevin recalls, "I'm looking at him, going, If he can do it, I'll do it." Kevin accepted the dare and started training. "I hated every minute of it," he says. "I swore that when I did the race, I'd never run again." His goal was to finish the 5K in under 36 minutes, but he did it in about 34. "I'm like, Cool, I can do this! I got hooked."

Now he exercises every morning, and the routine is sacred. "I love doing triathlons," he says. "I love the people. They're so self-motivated and encouraging. I'm not a good athlete, but my friends tell me, 'Hey man, look at you—you're doing awesome!' That kind of thing goes over into your everyday life ... and I realized that I can't take care of anybody else if I can't take care of me."

A

fter lunch, Kevin is driving in the company's hybrid vehicle along the coastal highway of Biloxi. On our left the brown waves of the Gulf of Mexico lap at the sandy beaches, empty on a Monday afternoon. "On a weekend, it's packed," says Kevin. He points to an off-white building with a red roof. "We built those bathrooms," he says. "It's a good example of us giving the community what it needs." He adds that they were built to withstand a surge of a Category 5 hurricane, should, God forbid, another Katrina come on land.

Kevin tells me that the road we're traveling, Highway 90, used to be their busiest fixed route, carrying 250,000 passengers per year.

“Overnight, that was totally gone,” he says.

Thanks to Katrina, “we lost our most productive route—the trolleys—and our facilities down here.” He points out past the passenger side window. “See the steps?” he asks. He points to a set of three red brick steps leading up to empty space. “Used to be a house,” he says, shaking his head. “Katrina.” Of the many houses that once lined the coastal highway, only concrete slabs and steps withstood the surge.

I ask Kevin what he considers the most frustrating aspect of the job, and he answers quickly. “The bureaucracy and regulatory compliance gets worse and worse every year,” he says. “It’s the part of my job I really don’t like. But I love serving the people.” He recalls that a few weeks ago, he spoke to a local rotary club. The president had asked Kevin for a bio, and Kevin told him, “All they need to know about me is that I work for them.”

Today Kevin believes Coast Transit has good standing in the community. While they get some complaints, “when you look at the amount compared to the amount of people we’re serving—it’s very small.” When customers do call with issues, Kevin has trained his staff to do two things: listen and apologize. “That’s all most people want,” he says, “to be listened to and get an apology.”

Soon we’re pulling into a multi-level, 550-car parking garage. Driving up to the roof deck, Kevin explains that Coast Transit will be taking over management of the parking for the Mississippi Aquarium that is being built.

From the funds they generate in parking fees, they will build a new intermodal hub. Kevin points to an abandoned building down below. “That used to be the library,” he says of the future Coast Transit hub. “It’s a historic building, and the community just loves that we’ll be preserving it.”

Kevin rests his hand on the ledge and looks nostalgic. “It’s real good work,” he says. “I really enjoy it. From a legacy standpoint, we should ask ourselves, ‘What have we contributed to our community? Did we leave it better than we found it? Did we make an impact?’” He looks off to the distance, past the seagulls circling, out to port and open water. “I think I’m making a positive impact,” he answers, “building things that’ll serve the community for a long time.” ■



Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach's first book is *The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General* (Ohio University Press, 2015). Her website is www.LLHuttenbach.com.



People Who Move People is a web series profiling individuals who have made an impact in public transit. The series has been initiated and funded by RouteMatch Software, an Atlanta-based company who is passionate about transit and proud to record these stories. Find out more at peoplewhomovepeople.