Dear LSU,

As a Gamecock fan, I had no expectations of winning against the Tigers this season, especially considering the last win South Carolina had was before I was even in high school. But as a Columbia resident, what I really did not expect was the overwhelming hospitality that LSU and the city of Baton Rouge has shown to the state of South Carolina in a time of need. I live in an area of Columbia, SC that was greatly affected by the flood water. Last weekend, I woke up to sirens and heavy rain, and as I looked outside to see what was going on, I saw the lights from emergency vehicles reflecting off the water that surrounded my house. I watched emergency crews help my neighbors out of their homes with a boat in waist deep water. I paced the floor all morning watching the water creep closer to the door. Luckily the water never came into my house or damaged my car, but many of the people in my neighborhood were not as fortunate. Some were taken to shelters, while the rest of us were stuck in our homes with street closures all around us, watching the horrific pictures of local areas on the news. I stayed glued to the TV all day, watching swift water rescues as dam after dam gave way.

My phone was inundated with phone calls, texts, and messages wanting to know two things: Was I okay? And what about the game? I had no answer for the latter, but as the days passed the water receded and clean-up began, and I started to wonder the same thing. As soon as I found out that Williams-Brice Stadium and surrounding area was untouched by the flood, I was hopeful that we may be able to have the game at home. All it took was a walk down my own street to change my mind. My own neighbors were dragging carpet and pieces of sheetrock out on the street, piling it up next to furniture and mattresses. Everything that had been in their house, all of what they own, in piles next to cars with the open doors and hoods. As firetrucks, police, and the Red Cross became regular visitors, I realized that there was no way the game could be played in Columbia. The emergency crews were working multiple shifts, stretching themselves thin, trying to help an entire population. I could see it in their eyes—the want to be everywhere at one time while being concerned for their own families and friends. The rain may have stopped, but it was impossible to take the manpower away from people who desperately needed help to direct traffic and control a crowd for a football game. Not to mention all of the roads that were completely washed out and closed, and there were still dams in danger of breaking. As much as I wanted the game to take place, to have something to cheer for, it just wasn’t feasible.

As soon as it was announced that the game would be moved to Baton Rouge, where LSU would host South Carolina, I was immediately assured that we would be well taken care of. If anyone in the world of college football knows about southern hospitality in a time of storm-related crisis, it was the state of Louisiana. I was actually in New Orleans just last year, a trip that absolutely changed my life, simply by putting my petty issues in perspective when I heard personal stories about loss that you didn’t hear on CNN. The way that New Orleans and the surrounding areas rallied together to support one another, to rebuild, and renew faith was exactly what South Carolina was doing now.

So, I started searching for information about the game and change of venue to write my usual preview, but what I found was way more than a simple comparison of players and statistics. I first came across a blog asking LSU fans for their opinions on what the Tigers should do to make South Carolina fans feel more at home. As I read the comments, I fully expected the typical tongue in cheek remarks about Gamecock fans. I was exceedingly mistaken. LSU students and fans suggested things such as a moment of silence, being quiet while South Carolina had the ball, all ticket sales going back to the University of South Carolina for flood victims, and even painting the field Gamecock colors. The more I googled, the more my heart grew. What I read inspired me to write something different, instead of an article, a letter to LSU. So Baton Rouge, let me tell you what this Columbia resident and Gamecock fan is thankful for. There were several state and local law agencies that committed hundreds of officers with short notice to cover the game. There were no recruiting visits for LSU for this game. Joe Alleva, LSU’s athletic director, worked hard to push the game back to 2:30pm to ensure as many fans could make it to the game as possible. Only about seventy-five percent of workers for home games were available to cover the impromptu game, but they were ready and willing to help. There were donation buckets for flood victims placed all around the campus prior to the game Saturday, as well as the American Red Cross taking donations at the gate and inside Tiger Stadium. Lamar Advertising changed several local signs to read “GEAUX GAMECOCKS” all over Baton Rouge.

There were also several local businesses donating proceeds, such as Marty J’s Seafood and Ruffino’s. I even had the pleasure of having a conversation with Marty J, who told me that he grew up on the bayou and his family home had flooded three times through Hurricanes Juan, Rita, and Ike. His restaurant not only gave a 20% discount to Gamecock fans who made the trip, but also donated 10% of proceeds to flood relief and gave away four east sideline tickets. When I thanked him for everything he was doing, he responded simply that it was the Cajun Way! The local restaurant Ruffino’s made gameday stickers that donned the Palmetto State emblem in yellow and purple that said “SC Strong”. They also raised money and donated $2,500 for the Red Cross in South Carolina. The HBC and Gamecock team were flown in on LSU’s chartered plane, where they were greeted with signs saying “Welcome USC Gamecocks! Our Home Is Your Home” as well as treated to a catered barbecue lunch. The LSU student association hosted a free tailgate for Gamecock and Tiger fans. The South Carolina state flag and Gamecock Block C flag flew high above Tiger Stadium and USC’s logo and Williams-Brice Stadium were also put on the press box nameplates. Before the game, representatives from both schools took part in a ceremony where LSU gave the keys to Tiger Stadium to South Carolina, and a moment of silence was observed for flood victims. LSU also played South Carolina’s hype video and Sandstorm was played prior to kick off, as South Carolina was regarded as the home team. LSU’s Golden Band learned South Carolina’s fight song in a matter of days and even played the USC alma mater in the endzone after the game. I even found out that there was a couple to be married on campus Saturday, who had to push the time of their ceremony back because of the game. They will be receiving a wedding gift from South Carolina.

The Gamecocks didn’t win, but we played with heart that I haven’t seen in a long time. Maybe it was because our players saw first hand the devastation of the same people that come to support them every Saturday, or maybe it was because they wanted to win for all of the fans. Regardless of the outcome, I know they are appreciative, as we all are in South Carolina. The short speech that Leonard Fournette made in his postgame interview was heart-warming, and I was pleased to find out that the NCAA will allow him to auction off his game jersey to raise money for flood victims. Such a gesture is inspiriting to football fans everywhere, because support is what it’s all about.

Last week, I had a Georgia beat writer send me a message asking if I was okay. I only know him professionally, but he said “We are literally family off the field.” He’s absolutely right. There have been many football programs aside from LSU, that have come together to help a fellow state in need. UGA has put together a team to aid in cleanup efforts and take up donations. Vanderbilt sent two tractor trailers to USC full of bottled water and asked people to donate to the Red Cross. The Mississippi State Athletic Department urged fans to donate supplies such as toilet paper, wipes, plastic flatware, etc. Ole Miss also asked people to drop off diapers, blankets, formula, nonperishable food, and clothes, as well as to make donations to the Red Cross. Even in-state rival Clemson University, raised over $12,000 to send to flood relief funds and painted the state of South Carolina with the word “ONE” in the middle to show that we are One SC. The efforts and support from everyone has been overwhelming and heart-warming.

Louisiana State University will always have a special place in this little Gamecock heart of mine. For the outpouring of love from the fans and locals, as well as the lengths that LSU and the city of Baton Rouge went to for the state of South Carolina and the fans of the Gamecock football team, THANK YOU. Death Valley was not the place where dreams go to die Saturday, it was the place that faith went to be restored.

Sincerely,