

Stories from Hurricane Irma...

...A nurse from Joanne Court locked in a dementia unit with a friend and three dogs for three days.

... Quail Forest residents opening their homes to others who decided to shelter in place or taking near-strangers with them to higher locations.

...A new resident of Hickorynut Avenue who spent two days sawing up branches that had fallen on the properties of neighbors he had yet to meet.

These are just some of the heartwarming stories that have emerged after Hurricane Irma barely missed our neighborhood. Read on....

As Irma approached on Friday, September 8, **Joanne Court resident Lorrie Krieger** knew she would likely have a long shift or two at St. Mark Village and Highland Lakes Assisted Living., where she is a nurse and is also on the management team. But she had promised a new Quail Forest resident, Gloria Hale that they would ride out the hurricane together, wherever they ended up. So when St. Mark

asked her to stay in the Memory Care Unit for the duration of the storm, she said, "Of course, but only if I can bring my two dogs, my friend, and her dog." So it was that the two women spent the weekend of the storm and all day Monday locked inside the unit...with Lorrie's 11-and 5-year-old Golden Retrievers and Gloria's 6-month-old Golden Retriever. "We stayed in an



apartment in the unit. I worked and Gloria took care of the dogs. The dietary staff cooked comfort foods for everyone there: homemade muffins in the mornings and hot dinners in the evening – courtesy of the four extra generators St. Mark had rented. Even so, Lorrie's and Gloria's stay was not without a moment of worry. "In the middle of the howling storm, when it was pitch black, I suddenly knew that there was somebody in our room." (Although the

Memory Care Unit is locked from the outside, all interior doors are left unlocked so that residents don't lock themselves or others inside individual rooms.) Alarmed, she carefully felt her way to the lights. Their visitor was a resident in her wheelchair and white nightie. "She had just toddled in because she wanted to see 'the puppies.' Altogether," she adds, "it was the most fun I have ever had in a hurricane." Now Lorrie is looking forward to a special thank you dinner the residents of St. Mark Village are planning. "They took up a collection and are planning to serve a sumptuous, multi-course dinner to all staff who helped with the storm. The dinner will be on October 18.

Nonagenarian Emily McMullen, who lives in an independent unit in St. Mark Village and is a friend of this writer, tells what happened in other parts of the facility while Lorrie and Gloria were locked in. "Management invited all staff to bring their entire families during the hurricane. Babies, children, even elderly family members moved into St. Mark's common areas. They came with pillows and blankets, iPads, toys, all sorts of things," she continues. Even "The Creamery" was kept open so that children and others could have milk or ice cream at any time, day or night. Despite the seriousness of the situation, "We really had fun," recalls Emily. She is one who helped fund the "thank you dinner" for the staff and will be serving food, a grateful smile on her face.

Audrey Ragona of Lesley Lane and her dog Georgie, a Yorkiepoo, also spent the hurricane in an institutional setting – the evacuation shelter at Carwells Middle School on Alderman Road – and remembers it as positively as Lorrie does her stay. "I had a good experience," she says. "I made new friends, exchanged phone numbers, and I was comfortable..... Georgie for some reason likes people in wheelchairs," she adds. "There was a 94-year-old woman in a wheelchair near me. Georgie jumped on her lap and spent all Sunday night there." Audrey herself was on a reclining beach chair that she had brought. Originally she had a reservation at a hotel on Tampa Road, she explains, but when the hotel called to cancel the reservation because the hotel was being evacuated, she turned to the shelter. "People there were just wonderful."

Hickorynut Avenue residents Doris (Dorie) Doyle and Judy Lance, as well as Mike DiFabbio from Kay Court, on the other hand, sheltered in place. Dorie, a nurse who formerly worked for the Pasco Medical Reserve Corps and had cared for people during hurricanes, decided to stay. "I was prepared. If I had to leave, I was ready. But I really had what I needed to remain in my house." She also invited neighbors Judy Lance and Mike DiFabbio to join her as the storm closed in on Sunday evening. Judy was concerned about her cat, Patrick, and the two cats she was watching for neighbors and thought she should stay rather than evacuate. Mike, who had originally planned to evacuate to a shelter, has had years of experience volunteering for organizations that help after hurricanes and other nature disasters, including Hurricane Katrina. He decided to stay to look after Judy and others who had sheltered in their homes. "I have seen

what Mother Nature can destroy,” he notes, and wanted to help people who might need assistance. Mike not only prepared his own house (moving up electronics and important papers, filling his freezer and refrigerator with ice and frozen bottles of water, and turning off all circuit breakers), but also helped prepare Judy’s. Hearing Doris’ invitation, Judy and Mike went to Doris’, where the rooms were already filled with glowing candles. “We all felt safe with each other, hunkering down for Hurricane Irma to come.” About 9 pm, Judy, concerned about her cat Patrick, returned to her home, guided through the strengthening winds by Mike. Mike then returned to Doris’ spare bedroom, concerned because she had recently had multiple surgeries on her arm.

We all know what happened next. Howling winds, the tap, tap, tap of cold rain on windows, sounds of trees falling and branches breaking. The power was out throughout most of Quail Forest for nearly 24 hours.

“There was nothing to do but wait it out,” says Mike. By 4 am the strong winds had settled



This is the pile of branches and debris on Hickorynut Avenue that Charles Sweeney, Roger Warfield and Connie Beck pulled together early in the morning after the hurricane.

down. “The storm seemed to have passed, and we had survived,” he states with remembered relief.

First thing in the morning, he and Judy drove around the whole neighborhood, noting trees and branches that had fallen. “It could have been far worse. No roofs off, no significant flooding,” recalls Judy.

She and Mike returned to Doris’ house, expecting a breakfast of whatever cold food she had on hand.

Instead, Doris was in her

kitchen, cooking on a butane-powered camp stove, which can be used safely inside a house.

“The best fried eggs, sausage and coffee any of us have ever had!” exclaims Mike. Several other neighbors, among them Nancy Kerr and John, Barb Kicherer and her friend Maureen, who had left her home in Dunedin and stayed with Barb., joined them for a meal and relieved conversation. When asked about feeding so many people in these circumstances, Dorie quipped, “That’s just the way I am.”

By this time, new Hickorynut Avenue resident Roger Warfield, was outside, using his battery operated saw to cut up branches and other debris that was littering the streets and yards. “I figured that I’m capable, why shouldn’t I help?” Warfield, who had just moved from Connecticut, helped clean up the properties of neighbors he had not yet met. “But hours before I got out, 4:30 am, to be exact, George Sweeney [also of Hickorynut Avenue] was cleaning debris out of the pond behind our homes and in the streets and storm sewers. “Connie Beck from across the street also helped out, moving debris and raking.”

As the hours passed, many residents, returning from homes or shelters in which they had ridden out the storm, began taking photos of the exteriors of homes and emailing or texting them to worried Snowbirds and others who had left their homes in advance of the storm. Connie Beck went into homes she had keys for and sent photos to the owners. In one unit, she discovered a wet rug in a lanai. Because of her alertness, the rug was ripped out before mildew and mold could set in.

Finally, we know that we dodged a bullet, maybe even a cannon, when the Category 5 hurricane moved to the east of our area and weakened to a Category 2. Perhaps there is some truth in the local legend that the Tocabaga Native American tribe, who built the Indian Mound in Philippe Park in Safety Harbor 1,000 years ago, is still protecting its camping ground – and, with it, those of us who live in the area – from the severe damage that is possible from hurricanes. It’s been almost 100 years since a hurricane made landfall in the greater Tampa Bay area. This near-miss will certainly be remembered by the many kindnesses shown to friends and strangers alike.

These are only some of the stories that have emerged from the Hurricane Irma experience. And we would love to publish more! Please contact Eleanor Cicerchi at ecicerchi@gmail.com or 607-382-1781. if you have a story to share.

Photos by Connie Beck.