

September 26th will be a date in time that I will always remember. Hurricane Helene was barreling down the gulf over 100 miles from shore and it was enormous. As a resident I felt confident that my husband Steve and I had adequately prepared for this storm at home. Living in a ground floor home there is only so much you can do. As Mayor, I made it a mission to have a highly trained staff and an Emergency Management Plan in place for hurricane response and recovery. I had confidence in our training but at the same time understood that we had never had the experience in response and recovery from a major catastrophic storm.

As Mayor, I made it a point to stay on the Island until the police made the decision to evacuate. Due to the distance the storm was from land, the chief kept his officers on the island in the event they needed to assist our citizens. This was a decision he still regrets.

It was around 9:00 in the evening when Steve and I had to abandon our home and move upstairs into a “bug out” room that we had just completed that year. The surge waters were already filling our home and when I reached out to Sage, our public works supervisor, he informed me that the UF models showed we would be getting another 1’ of surge. By the time I grabbed my essentials and some shorts and t shirts we found ourselves in waist deep water to get to the exterior stairs leading to our safe room. It was dark and I remember wading through so much debris in total darkness and saying out loud to Steve “can you even believe we are experiencing something like this in our lifetime”. With all our pets secured upstairs, we showered with a big “thank you” to the county for leaving our water pressure on and went to sleep.

It was 5:00 in the morning when Chief called to tell me he was sending the high-water vehicle over to pick me up for the tour of the city. I threw on my shorts and t shirt and mullet boots and met them at the end of my driveway. The water had subsided, but everything was a mess.

We drove up and down the city streets first looking at the commercial districts and then residential. The water lines were several feet high on just about every property. The magnitude of the damage from flooding was uncomprehensible. I have been in the keys after hurricanes and all I could imagine was the mountains of debris that would soon be lining every street in our city.

I immediately reported to the city with police and public works. Our response mission was in full activation and our pre-awarded debris contractors and monitors were contacted to rapidly respond. We worked closely with the county EOC team and our state partners on mission requests to address all public safety needs and to get our roads back opened just as soon as possible.

I am trying to think back to what was going through my mind at that time knowing I had most likely lost all my belongings, but I never questioned where I was supposed to be. I was needed most in the city to serve our residents and to give our command staff the support they needed to respond to this tragedy. A tragedy that caused massive destruction along the entire coast of Florida, including Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

When I finally made it back home that afternoon, I realized my grown kids had come to the house by boat with gas, cleaning supplies, and coolers of food and drinks. They were working so hard at not only my house but my mother's house who also had

taken in 3 feet of water. Many of my things were already pulled to the street. What they could save they had in organized piles to be taken to storage once the roads were back opened. This is when I began to cry. It wasn't because of my loss. It was because of the gratitude that I had for my husband and kids for taking this off my plate. Just thinking about it today still brings me to tears on just how thankful I was at that very moment.

As chief is aware, one of my most important goals is to get our property owners back on the island as quickly as possible. We were able to open our streets in a matter of a few days. I will never forget greeting the people coming back onto the island and having to hand them flyers on how to prepare their debris for pick up. The fear in their eyes of what they were about to see will live with me forever. The island was devastated. These people were going to open their doors to so much destruction in their homes, and my heart was so heavy for them that day.

We were only on our mission for a matter of days when we were notified of another hurricane track in our direction. We made the call to hold off on mobilizing our onsite debris field due to public safety concerns of debris becoming missiles in the neighboring residential districts. We felt any debris left on the streets would be less likely to fly as it received some wind blocking from buildings. This slowed down debris removal as it was a lengthy drive to the landfill out east but in looking back, it was the right call. Most all debris piles remained intact with hurricane Milton. Because of the length of time it took the trucks to get to and from the landfill, we worked with FDOT to assist in removing as much of the debris from our main roads as possible up into the time Milton hit the islands.

My husband and I evacuated for Hurricane Milton. We stayed in a house in town with several of our kids. It was a

sleepless night as the winds were fierce and the house we were staying in lost its aluminum screen enclosure.

I arrived early the next day on the Island with the Chief to survey the damage. What Helene didn't take; Milton did. I made it to my home and found we lost much of our dock, seawall, and many of our trees. We had to chainsaw our way into our driveway. At this point I have already accepted our losses and focused on what is important in life and that is resilience.

I once again reported on duty at city hall and found an entirely new command staff team sitting in the conference room. Sage had sent in a mission request for a command staff to assist in our recovery knowing that our own staff were running for a week and 1/2 with no days off and minimal rest and could use the help. This team was from Texas A & M Forestry and brought with them a team of ten with years of experience and knowledge. The ability for our team to shadow them and have hands on training in this new mission was a tremendous opportunity for our city.

Debris hauling was mobilized to full scale to include utilizing our own debris site at city hall. Construction and home debris was priority, followed by vegetative debris and then white goods and household waste. The extent of debris at each resident was enormous and, in most cases, would not even fit in the right of ways. Subcontractors are typically not allowed to move into private property to remove debris. Most residents chose to have the city contract haulers remove their debris as opposed to hiring their own contractors. Our consultants estimated over 3M in debris removal costs by aerial views. The city followed the guidelines for FEMA reimbursements both in educating the citizens in debris separation, hiring pre-awarded debris haulers and monitors and having a DEP pre- approved debris site.

Reimbursements have been obligated by FEMA and these monies will replenish our reserves for the upfront costs. This will allow us to continue to have reserves for future storms.

One of the things I had no control of was the timing of the election. I had to focus on our recovery and felt it in bad taste to campaign when our residents were homeless. Although I ended up winning, it was too close for comfort, and I can't help but feel a natural disaster was politicized.

We just moved back into our home in late July. It was a long road to recovery. I can't tell you the amount of gratitude that I have for the entire city staff for the blood, sweat, and tears that they endured during our response and recovery efforts. I hug my kids each day knowing they were there to pick me up when I needed them the most. The Hurricanes were life changing and I feel stronger for it. This was a learning experience for all, and our resilience tested. The community came together, and I couldn't have been prouder. People from all over the country came to assist one another. Living on this piece of paradise doesn't come without its challenges but I wouldn't have it any other way. Our community is resilient, caring, and kind.