

Helping Hands and the Challenges of Recovery from Hurricane Harvey

By Sandra Tzul

As Houstonians rode out Hurricane Harvey — the most devastating storm in Houston’s history — recovery weighed heavily on their minds. Rains pounded the area in late August 2017, as residents witnessed rising water levels, destruction of homes, and despair in people’s eyes. Through it all, volunteers and ordinary people worked to tame the chaos.

Churches and community organizations played a significant role in aiding people who had no one to help them with food and clothing or shelter and home repair. Some people lacked flood insurance, and even those who had it faced intense pressure navigating their recovery, desperately seeking assistance.

Pastor Rudy Rasmus, who leads St. John’s United Methodist Church with his wife Juanita Rasmus, believes in reciprocal accountability: the church and the faith community have a responsibility to give. Since 1992, the congregation has served meals to thousands of people, especially through its nonprofit Bread for Life ministry, which aids people facing disasters or challenges in their daily lives. Pastor Rudy explained that their outreach originated with “a collective of individuals who have come from different walks of life and different zip codes, different backgrounds and experiences [who] all felt that this is the one thing that we should be doing.”¹

With its downtown location largely unharmed by Harvey, the church became a staging area to receive and distribute goods. Singer Beyoncé, a St. John’s member who grew up in the church, came to help. She requested her sponsors donate items, which included about a thousand mattresses



Pastor Rudy Rasmus of St. John’s United Methodist Church pointed out that the church has helped with disasters for so long, they instinctively know what people need and how to care for them.

Photo courtesy of Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey.



As the city struggled to recover from Harvey, Houstonians found ways to ensure their neighbors got what they needed by cruising neighborhoods with supplies.

Photo courtesy of Debbie Z. Harwell.

and, Pastor Rudy estimated, “sixty eighteen-wheeler loads of supplies” from one organization over eighteen months. Her friend, entertainer Tyler Perry, wrote a check for \$250,000 to help Harvey survivors.²

Nearby, Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church relief center also helped those in need with donations they received. As evacuees arrived, church members and volunteers connected people with the help they needed. Gloria Rose, a Wheeler member, recognized “that a lot of [them] that came, they had never heard about FEMA. So they wouldn’t have known to go and get a FEMA number, but they were in need.” Rose, who felt disrespected in her recovery after Hurricane Katrina, wanted people impacted by Harvey to know that the volunteers were there to help them, not belittle them. Deacon Endra Cosby, who played a major role in the church’s relief effort, observed, “Everyone just kept sending and bringing and giving [donations].” Senior pastor, the Rev. Dr. Marcus Cosby, vowed, “We[re] going to keep giving. And the more we give, the more we get. This is what Wheeler Avenue does.”³

The pressure of rebuilding a storm-ravaged home exceeded what many people could handle alone. Initially, they needed help with the physical work, and many volunteers offered it. The First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood and pastor Mark Renn stepped up to help Kingwood residents who needed assistance cleaning out their flooded homes after Harvey. Based on past experience, he assembled crews who helped muck and gut homes, removing everything wet — furniture, flooring, and sheetrock. They also moved debris from front yards to the curb so bulk garbage trucks could pick it up.⁴

The relief provided by volunteers lifted a weight off the shoulders of storm survivors who were shocked at seeing their homes destroyed. Renn recognized that in a time of despair, people “did not know where to start” nor “what to do next.” The church crews could comfort them, saying, “Okay, you’re fine now.” Renn, like Gloria Rose, understood the importance of volunteers approaching the flood victims with sensitivity and respect for what they had lost. He estimated 200 volunteers helped in the three weeks following Harvey, and a small group continued on with debris clean-up. Renn credited the volunteers’ faith for the support the church gave to thousands of survivors, including the muck and gut operations, providing meals, offering counseling, and more.⁵

James Joseph, a Fifth Ward community leader and resident, recalled that the “real help” emerged when local nonprofits, churches, and charities stepped in to aid the relief efforts. The compassion of these organizations and their volunteers transcended class, ethnic, and geographic boundaries. Joseph remembered feeling “pleasantly surprised to see the compassion from more affluent people helping” in his community. The general concern he saw for those afflicted by Harvey reaffirmed his belief that “a hurricane can take the mind, but it can’t take the heart.”⁶

While community organizations helped thousands of storm survivors, the disaster’s massive scale caused others to take a different approach rather than wait for aid. For example, skyrocketing demand for home repair forced some people to become their own general contractors, learn how to install sheetrock, and return home before their repairs were completed because they could no longer afford temporary housing.⁷

One major factor in residents’ ability to move ahead was if they had flood insurance. Many people felt safe because

their homes had never flooded, and others could not afford a policy, but both groups experienced financial hardship when water inundated their homes in Harvey. In Harris County, “just fifteen percent of 1.6 million homes had flood insurance,” and “only twenty-eight percent of homes in ‘high risk’ areas for flooding” had it. Hurricane Harvey set a FEMA record for disaster assistance applications. FEMA assists those who qualify with a temporary residence and in making their home safe and livable, but it does not restore the home to its pre-storm condition.⁸



Elgene Muscat took a photograph (left) of her neighborhood as she evacuated. For her flood claim FEMA expected an inventory of all her damaged belongings, even toothpaste. Photos courtesy of Elgene Muscat.

FEMA agents visited homes to inspect the damages, but the applicants’ experiences differed. For example, FEMA required some homeowners to provide an extensive inventory of the items they lost. According to Elgene Muscat, the form asked, “How many tubes of toothpaste [did you have]? ... How many bars of soap did you lose? How many towels did you have? ... And then on some of the more expensive items, they wanted pictures of the labels.” She expressed her frustration: “Not only do I not have the picture of the label, [but] that stuff was hauled off weeks ago” by the garbage trucks. She saw a “disconnect” between what the government agencies required to process a claim and the reality of flood victims’ circumstances as they tried to gut their houses. By contrast, Northeast Houston resident Alvinea Randolph recalled the FEMA agent who visited her home “walked around, and that was it”; he asked no questions.⁹ After a lengthy wait, she received an email saying she was denied aid.

Tom and Lisa Slagle had flood insurance, but they still “had to figure out how to navigate [the system] from one day to the next.” Their insurance did not cover exterior damage, and the interior coverage also had limits. For example, after the water came up their staircase, flood insurance only covered replacement carpet to the waterline at the fifth step rather than matching all the way to the top of the stairs, as happens with most homeowners’ insurance. Other types of aid were limited because they had insurance. FEMA gave



Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church became a staging ground for supply distribution efforts. A year later, the church was still distributing financial aid to those in need.

Photo courtesy of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.

them money for one month's rent, but they were out of their home for eighteen months. They applied for a low-interest Small Business Administration loan but received only \$25,000 of the original \$197,000 they expected. They also applied for part of the \$1.2 billion the City of Houston received to help Harvey survivors but still had not received a decision at the time of this magazine's publication.¹⁰



Ana Vazao's home required heavy repair work to restore it to a livable condition. She found strength in two phrases: "It is what it is" and "it is okay not to be okay." Photo courtesy of Ana Vazao.

Ana Vazao did not have flood insurance on her Crosby home of fourteen years, which flooded for the first time during Harvey. Although friends offered Ana a place to stay, she had no economic support, so she sought FEMA aid. Phone lines were swamped, but Ana was among the 317,150 Texas residents approved for assistance. She returned home every weekend from mid-September to March to see about starting repairs. The experience was arduous; Ana had to dedicate her "energy, [and] power [to] just taking care of the home ... [and] making appointments with contractors." However, her hassles with contractors did not end there. Ana's walls had to be redone three times because contractors made mistakes like failing to install insulation and cracking the water pipes. Ana's home was finally completed almost a year after Harvey.¹¹

Many other Harvey survivors also emphasized the difficulties in finding a reliable contractor. One Kingwood resident, Kathy Scott, and her husband, who did not have flood insurance, took out a \$100,000 loan to pay for the repairs caused by two feet of water, adding, "It's emotional, losing everything you worked so hard for over the years." Every step of the way the Scotts had problems with contractors who were not truthful or did not complete repairs properly. Over a year later, their bathroom, floors, and kitchen were still not done, and they had no furniture downstairs. The couple lived on the second floor of their home as repairs continued, including some they were doing themselves. A flood survivor and resident of the same neighborhood where almost 80 percent of the homes flooded, Don Witt estimated that half of the area's homes either had not started repairs or had them ongoing in October 2018.¹²

Especially in heavily flooded neighborhoods, people could not wait on others to begin rebuilding their beloved homes, and they learned how to do portions of the work themselves. Lynne and John Boone had flood insurance but no connection with a general contractor, and the ones they contacted asked the couple to wait for months. The Boones, who lost everything, became their own general contractor and purchased materials from builders' supply stores for their subcontractors.¹³ The couple finally returned home ten months later after living in seven different locations.

José Manuel Méndez was also forced to begin repairs on his home by himself, learning as he went even while working two jobs and taking care of his family. He described the time, saying, "Everything is shaky, and you're trying to figure things out as you go." He learned construction skills by doing his own electrical work, plumbing, sheetrock, and painting. When the repairs were about half complete, finances forced his family to move back home because they could no longer afford the mortgage and rent. More than a year later, he lamented, "The house is not a hundred percent complete."¹⁴



José Manuel Méndez and his son worked on their damaged home even as the world around them began returning to normalcy. His younger children worried when it rained and asked their dad, "Is it going to flood again?" Photo courtesy of José Manuel Méndez.

The recovery process and the challenges people faced repairing their homes reveal the devastating effects of Hurricane Harvey. The organizations and individuals who helped gut homes or provided storm survivors with food, shelter, and clothing played a crucial role in restoring people's lives. Others rose to the occasion by figuring out how to support themselves. Whether they utilized help or went it alone, Houstonians showed their resilience and determination to recover in the aftermath of the storm.

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