

Surviving Hurricane Irma

We hadn't really planned on evacuating the Masonic Home of Florida on a bayou off of Tampa Bay in St. Petersburg, where we had moved only three weeks before. Our building was strong enough, and Plan A was to move all nursing patients and food supplies to the second and third floors and to rely on three generators and plenty of fuel for our electrical needs. However, things didn't turn out that way.

On Saturday afternoon as we were jamming with a male nurse on mandolin, Joan on fiddle, Jack on frog rhythm, and a dog and nurse's family on vocals and egg shakers, an announcement was made that we had been mandated by the county to evacuate to higher ground (we are about 6 feet above sea level and Clearwater is about 20 feet) because of possible storm surges, in which case emergency help might not be available. So 20 minutes later, Jack and I found ourselves on a county school bus bumping across the peninsula to a designated recreation center closer to the Gulf of Mexico. We had been warned that evacuation might be a possibility, but that it would be to a Masonic Lodge in Clearwater. Well, the best of plans don't necessarily take place!

The rec center was actually quite nice looking with sufficient rest room facilities, but moving 96 elderly residents along with 20 staff members and food, bedding, and medical supplies on short notice was quite a daunting undertaking. However, Plan B turned out to be a very well-planned and efficient operation. A group of police manned the entrance area, and the Red Cross provided food and coffee for the local folks.

At first we were given a separate room, but a little too small for such a large and diverse group, but we all managed to eat and sleep together there that first night. It was quite a sight to see 10 policemen and women tossing the Masonic food boxes across the room from a transport palatte to stack them on the other side! Jack and my mattresses (on the floor) arrived about 3 am, so we fell asleep instantly--a good thing, since we awoke about 6 am to face the new day.

The 2nd day (Sunday) we acquired one-half of a large gymnasium that was curtained off from the local evacuees for the larger part of our group, while the more critical nursing patients were sequestered in the original space with most of the nursing equipment. We learned that our home keeps all our medical records and medications on rolling cabinets which had been transported with us.

Our staff made heroic efforts to keep us all supplied with food, bedding, medical supplies, other equipment, and attention to see that we were safe and cared for during our excursion. Our home population consists of almost independent folks through assisted, nursing, and memory care residents. It is easy to imagine how anyone would become more disoriented in an emergency.

On the second night (Sunday) the lights went out, and the rec center generators kicked in. Many residents began to wake up about 3 am during Irma's fierce winds, sitting or wandering aimlessly through the room, trying to pass the time without waking the public contingent on the other side of a large curtain. Making sure that no one sleeping on the floor was run over and

keeping wanderers from going out into the dark and very windy night from the unlocked gym doors kept the staff very busy. In addition, they were also responsible for helping every resident both up and down from the mattresses on the floor and escorting them to the restrooms, so our incredible staff really earned our admiration!

During the day some played Monopoly and Uno, but most just sat around talking from time to time. We did manage to have a sing-along the second evening, aided by the nurse's mandolin and a ukulele I had stashed in my bag. We didn't miss a meal--fruit and cereal for breakfast, hot MREs for lunch, and sandwiches for supper, with snacks of all sorts and bottled water in between. While we were kept safe, fed adequately, and had familiar staff with us, I would not recommend this kind of activity as vacation material!

Meanwhile, our Masonic Home survived Irma quite intact in St. Petersburg. We were all very happy to return home after two nights away! It was a very interesting experience to share with over 200 people at the rec center and made us really appreciate sleeping in our own beds again. Can you believe that arriving at our rooms we were greeted with a boxed supper of delicious crab cakes, French fries, and sliced tomatoes? The next day we had Cornish game hens and beef stroganoff--all prepared without regular electric service. Today is Thursday, and we are still on our generators, as the electric has not yet been restored in much of St. Pete. How lucky we are to be here at the Masonic Home!

- Masonic Home Resident