

Author's note:

I recorded my thoughts before Hurricane Wilma, and then afterwards. I would like to share them with you.

Hurricane Wilma  
Rising up from the ashes  
By Valarie Bostic

Sunday, October 23, 2005

Life is funny sometimes. It has a way of twisting and turning and changing so that you never can be quite prepared for what you might encounter. Or, in the unsophisticated words of Forrest Gump, "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get."

As Hurricane Wilma heads straight for Southwest Florida, I am stunned. I guess I thought that once October hit, all would be well. After all, the waters are cooling down. Guess I was wrong. It's a major storm, headed directly for Southwest Florida.

I work in Collier County where it is predicted the storm will pass. Tensions are high and people are distressed. Many are trying to evacuate. Many simply cannot afford to. Schools are cancelled and frustration has set in. My parents live in Hendry County and have decided to ride out the storm. We are all on edge at the unknown.

As I sit in my home in Lehigh Acres, Florida, a suburb in Lee County, very near Fort Myers, I am wondering what is going to happen. Will this be another Charley? Or perhaps even worse?

Nobody wants to speculate. Life is too short for speculation. You just have to live it and deal with what comes, as it comes. And oh yes. Let's not forget. Prepare and Pray, the P's of life.

My husband has been called to man a shelter in Fort Myers for people with pets. While I understand the need, I don't want to be separated from him during this time. Like many others, I also don't wish to leave my home. I just have to be strong for my children and for myself, even though I am scared. There is simply nothing I can do, it is out of my control. So in the words of my husband, I will just say, "See you on the other side of the storm."

Sunday, October 30, 2005

At about 4:45 AM Monday morning, the power went out. This was just the beginning. The rain and wind were strong but I wasn't that afraid. When the backside of the hurricane came, that's when fear actually set in. The doors were shaking violently and I could hear a whistling sound, like a teapot getting ready to boil. I thought I heard the sound of someone screaming coming from outside. I realized it was the force of the wind as it hurled through the trees. The boys and I huddled in the living room, waiting for the storm to pass. Peeking out the top of a small space in the door not covered by boards, I could see the branches of the trees whipping about brutally.

My husband and I kept phone contact throughout the entire storm. This soothed my ragged nerves somewhat knowing he was okay. I was worried about my family who lives in Hendry County. My parents live in Montura, just outside of Clewiston. I finally spoke to my sister and found out they were okay, having weathered the storm in a local church shelter. I was somehow able to get through to my brother's house in Clewiston to find out the extent of the damage. It was then I knew that the town better known as, "America's sweetest town," would be forever changed.

My family and I headed to Hendry County to check on family. When I finally saw my mother, I felt a rush of relief come over my body. We had brought water, ice and gas for their generator. My dad, who is part of Montura's first response team, had been assessing the situation and helping the neighbors in need. The damage was extensive. Many of the residents live in mobile homes that had been ruined. A truck somehow ended up in a tree. It was unreal. But the flooding was the worst. It wasn't safe to drive down many of the roads for fear of hitting a downed power line or run the risk of riding into a canal. Debris was everywhere, much of it covered by flooded

streets.

When I went to Immokalee in rural Collier County to check on the Child Care Center where I work, I was astounded. While much of the town had sustained damage, my Center still stood, a light in the darkness, a haven for children, a place truly blessed by God. Staff members slowly filed in to assist with the cleanup, blessed to have made it through in one piece, happy to be reunited with those we have grown to care about. Immokalee, meaning, "My Home," is a strong community with a spirit of determination. This is a town that will persevere and rise to the occasion and overcome all obstacles.

On Saturday, we went back to Hendry County to help with the cleanup and be with family. The town of Clewiston itself took a major hit. I have never seen so much devastation in my life. As we rode through town, I felt a lump form in my throat and choked back tears. This small country town, the home of US Sugar, a place where I had once lived, looked like a bomb had gone off. Several of the local mobile home parks had been destroyed, and with them, the lives of families. It looked like the aftermath of a ravaged war zone. People lined up for Red Cross assistance, homeless, hungry and in need, many of them beyond anger and frustration. They were simply weary.

Yet, in the middle of all this devastation, I saw something else. I saw a small child riding his skateboard outside what was left of his home. I saw a group of children, tossing around a football, seemingly unaware of the chaos that surrounded them. Their home had no roof and the back porch had been ripped off. Yet, they took a minute to enjoy the simplicity of being children. One little girl clutched her beloved teddy bear closely. In the difficult times, a dear friend can make all the difference, even if he is stuffed.

I knew at that moment that there is indeed a God. I saw Him in the smiles of children who had lost everything, but remained undaunted by it all. I saw His spirit in the Red Cross workers as they worked diligently and endlessly to make the lives of others more comfortable. I saw it in the eyes of National Guard troops who handed out ice and water to a long line of people waiting for such basic necessities. It is in everyone who has helped another during this troublesome time.

I felt God in my own heart, because as it was breaking to see people go through such suffering, losing everything but their very lives, it rejoiced in the knowledge and understanding that there are still those who care and come together for good, despite the circumstances.

On the outside of a ravaged mobile home in Tropical Trailer Park on the edge of town, a condemned and unlivable wreck that had once been someone's home, I saw a hand painted sign that touched my very soul. It read, "God Bless, be thankful for the little things. Remember, you can rebuild." Hope is eternal in the hearts of those who still have faith.

Yes, life is funny sometimes. It has a way of twisting, turning and changing. You might not be prepared for what lies ahead. In the great words of Nietzsche, "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." You just have to hope for the best and ask God for the rest.

A spirit of strength and courage has triumphed over tragedy. It brought me to the humble realization that life still goes on whether it be good or bad. God is still in control and somehow in Southwest Florida, in the small inland farming communities that are often overlooked by the outside world, beauty will indeed rise from the ashes.