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## Should I Stay or Should I Go? A Disaster Researcher's Personal Dilemma

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## Should I Stay or Should I Go? A Disaster Researcher's Personal Dilemma

**By Fernando Rivera**  
UCF Forum columnist

Wednesday, September 27, 2017

I am a disaster researcher. I study the social processes by which communities work in building resilience to emergency events, particularly natural disasters. But earlier this month when the possibility of Hurricane Irma striking Central Florida was becoming real, I also became part of the unfolding event.

Gov. Rick Scott declared a state of emergency on Monday, Sept. 4, and as I went grocery shopping the water aisles started to empty. I addressed my honors medical sociology students, told them to take the threat seriously and encouraged them to complete their disaster kits and possible evacuation plans. As the class concluded, I told them that I was hoping to see them back in class that Thursday. But that never happened.

Concerns grew as I received a text on Wednesday from UCF Alert, a communication system that informs the university community about emergency situations. The text stated that all classes were canceled for the rest of the week. On Thursday, there was still some sense of normality; my kids went to school, I did some work at the office, and kept a watchful eye on Irma's projected path.

Then another notice, this time from the Seminole County Public School System: Classes were canceled for that Friday. By now, resignation. Like it or not, Irma was coming.

I have visited and spoken with most emergency managers in Central Florida. I know we are in very good hands. I know that Florida is one the best emergency-management systems in the country. But I was hearing all the talk in the media about the strength, size and unprecedented nature of this storm.

I should have been level headed and I tried my best. In all honesty, I was afraid and wondered what I should do. Pack up and head north? Stay? Go to a shelter? Even with my expertise, these were decisions that were not meant to be taken slightly.

By Saturday, my family and I decided to stay. We had all the supplies we could get, window shutters were up in the house, and the forecast suggested the hurricane eye was moving east away from us. Things were looking good and spirits were lifted. Now the waiting for the storm began.

As I continued to monitor the path of Irma, bad news trickled in. The storm was moving west, expected to ride up the gulf coast of Florida, directly impacting Tampa. My heart sank as I know that the eastern side of hurricanes always pack the strongest winds and rain. Resignation, again. Did I made the right choice? Did I put my family in harm's way?

Glued to weather reports I was hoping for a change in Irma's trajectory. Saturday night brought even worse projections, the eye of Irma shifted more east, and the possibility of a direct strike was upon us. It was the beginning of one of the longest nights of my life.

Saturday evening, emergency alerts started to arrive: "Tornado warning, seek shelter immediately!" We all packed into the safety of the bathroom and waited for the warning to expire. No luck, as the night progressed we received six additional tornado warnings.

Time stood still that night.

The wind started to blow, rain began to pour and we were bracing for the worst of it at 2 a.m. I did my best to comfort the kids. We played games and kept an eye on the news. As reports of power outages began to trickle in, flashlights were nearby and we waited for our power to go out. Luckily for us, it never did.

Around 2:30 a.m., the eye approach our area, the winds kept blowing, gusts shook the house to its core, and in the darkness of night it was hard to tell what was going on. By 4:30 a.m., I couldn't stay awake. For an hour or so, sheer tiredness allow me to sleep. But it was short lived. The howling of the winds woke me up and I was just hoping for it to stop. *Please just stop, Irma. Move on, please!*

Daylight finally arrived and I peeked through the window to get a glimpse of the damage. I could see a section of the back fence was down and several roof shingles on the ground. In all, I felt a sense of relief that the worst of the storm had passed and that we were going to be OK. Resignation turned into relief. Good call on staying put. We made it!

As neighbors started to come out to assess the damage, there was a strong sense of community. Everyone asked if others were OK, how they could help, etc. By far, we dodged a bullet; things could have been a lot worst, and it was for many others around the state, Georgia, South Carolina, and those in Anguilla, Antigua, Barbuda, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico, St. Martin, St. Barts, St. Kitts and Nevis, Turks and Caicos, and the Virgin Islands.

I am grateful to all emergency personnel, media and governmental officials for their hard work to keep us informed and safe.

As I reflect on the experience, I cannot be certain that I would stay if a hurricane like Irma comes our way again.

But one thing that was reinforced for sure is that preparation is the best tool to get ready and recover from a storm.

Should I stay or should I go next time? Hopefully I won't have to find out soon. My fingers are crossed.

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