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Experiencing Goodness in the Midst of Challenge

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Experiencing Goodness in the Midst of Challenge

By Adam Meyer

UCF Forum columnist

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As a resident of Orlando, I share the following thoughts on my recent Hurricane Irma experience with these acknowledgments: I did not experience housing damage beyond some lost shingles and minor water entry in a bedroom; our family lost power for about 36 hours and we were able to stay with family in the meantime; our lives as a family of six returned to relative normal within two days after Irma left. I recognize that these realities impact my perceptions of the Irma experience because it was ultimately a speed bump for us in the journey of life. I know that many other people impacted this year by hurricanes Jose, Irma and Maria were not so fortunate. Life is forever different and some people remain in full recovery and rebuilding mode even today, weeks after the hurricanes departed.

Hurricane Irma was my first real hurricane experience since moving to Florida four years ago. Perhaps it was the size and the time to prepare and wonder, which is both good and bad. But in the midst of all of the chaos, I will never forget the urgency and community comradery on the Friday before Irma arrived in Orlando on Sunday, Sept. 10.

My day started when I arrived at an Orange County sandbag station at 5:30 a.m. even though it did not open until 7 a.m. As the 40th car, I had concerns “the line” would become blurry by 7 p.m.

The station was at an intersection and I wondered how the county employees would manage the crowds and know who was truly next in line. Thankfully, some wonderful woman also in line for sand had a similar concern and passion for those of us in line early. She spent the better part of an hour working with the county employees to develop a system that ensured the 5:30 a.m. arrivers would not be lost in the complex line evolving. Thanks to her dedication, I had sand bags by 7:30 a.m. “The line” was three hours long at that point.

The rest of the day included other amazing experiences.

We went to a home-improvement store to see what sort of plywood remained – which was none. So I scrambled to buy picket fence boards and other pieces that I could use for window protection. However, I could not find concrete screws to put into the window frames. Being from the north and never having boarded my windows, I arrived home with my 80 random pieces of wood and asked a neighbor how he secures them. He explained his simple process, and when I mentioned I was still in search of screws, he gave me the remaining 60 from his box that he did not need. I later found that to be the exact amount I needed!

Having to do one more shopping run before working on the windows, we made one stop for batteries near another home-improvement store where I noticed across the parking lot people leaving with plywood. By the time we got in line, we were one of the last five to get plywood. I will always remember how relaxed and calm the line was under the circumstances.

Not being overly handy and not previously interested in investing in power tools, I started measuring our windows and cutting plywood with a handsaw with the help of my 11-year-old son. Our process worked but was time-consuming. Just over halfway through, a different neighbor came over after helping another neighbor board her windows. He offered to use his construction knowledge and power tools to complete the boarding project in way less time than it would have taken me.

As we were cutting boards, another set of neighbors asked if they could have the extra pieces from our cuts to pull something together for their windows. And we also gave our initial 80 random pieces of wood to another friend who was scrambling for window protection.

There were so many moments of giving and kindness during the day. People we do not normally see or talk with were helping one another out.

We were experiencing community as it was intended to be lived.

With our busy schedules and our comfortable air conditioned homes, my neighborhood experience has been one where people live in relative isolation. But for that one day, nothing else mattered other than doing what we could do to keep our homes and neighborhood safe.

I think we bought and gave away \$200 in supplies but received that amount back in other supplies and in labor.

And as quickly as that hurricane threat came, so it went. Our neighborhood came away without any major hurricane issues, the electricity came back on and our lives swiftly reverted to the routine once again.

It is fantastic that people can rally together and connect in such profound ways in times of uncertainty and crisis. But why does it take these moments to create that synergy?

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