

Relief comes slowly for coastal towns recovering from Harvey

September 4 2017, by Kelly P. Kissel



In this Aug. 30, 2017, photo, Ed Ziegler, owner of Moby Dick's restaurant, surveys the damages to his property after Hurricane Harvey made landfall, in Port Aransas, Texas. "I made a deal with the Lord that if I survived I'd give him 100 percent. Now I'm hoping he'll settle for 10," he said, using humor to cope with the destruction around him. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

Some shoreline communities that bore the brunt of Hurricane Harvey still need clean water, electricity and health care more than a week after the winds and rain subsided.

Locals in Port Aransas, Seadrift and Sargent awoke on Aug. 25 expecting a hurricane along the lines of Bret and Dolly, storms weak enough to have their names recycled by the National Hurricane Center.

But by nightfall, when it was too late for more people to leave, Harvey had grown stronger than Katrina, throwing winds of 130 mph.

"We stayed because it was a Category 2," said Connie Wooldridge, a high school calculus teacher who tries daily to line up meals for about a quarter of Seadrift's 1,400 residents. "We didn't know it was going to be a Category 4."

Rockport and Port Aransas, 13 miles (21 kilometers) south, bore the brunt of one of the strongest hurricanes to hit the United States.

Across from the landmark shark's mouth that welcomes visitors to a Port Aransas souvenir store, a 5-foot storm surge left marks on the walls of the Moby Dick's restaurant. Glassware survived, tucked in wooden racks above the bar, so owner Ed Ziegler can again serve his specialty Flaming Volcano cocktail for \$19 if he reopens the restaurant.



In this Sept. 2, 2017, photo, Bob Campbell baths outdoors using a makeshift shower he attached to a garden hose, in Port Aransas, Texas. Rockport and Port Aransas bore the brunt of one of the strongest hurricanes to hit the United States. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

"I'm not going to let Hurricane Harvey beat me now," Ziegler said, leading a group of visitors inside to see an aquarium that had been lifted from a stand and placed on the ground nearby—with fish intact.

"I made a deal with the Lord that if I survived I'd give him 100 percent. Now I'm hoping he'll settle for 10," he said.

Northeast of where Harvey's eye crossed the coast, Caney Creek at Sargent still runs so high that a swinging bridge to one part of the community cannot be moved safely and a stationary bridge to another part is unusable because of a hole in its deck. In the span of an hour,

water that had been flowing 2 inches deep across access roads was growing deeper—and bubbling up through cracks in the asphalt in a sure sign of erosion from beneath.

"We could really use medical supplies," said Jason Boyd, a former fire chief who is directing emergency response at the town's Veterans of Foreign Wars hall.

A boy who fell during the storm and may have broken an arm didn't have it splinted until a National Guardsman checking on the community afterward slung together a makeshift one before heading elsewhere.



In this Aug. 30, 2017, photo, Bob Campbell and his girlfriend Elizabeth Umbaugh are reflected in the mirror of his truck as he returns to his home in Port Aransas, Texas, for the first time following Hurricane Harvey making landfall. Harvey's coastal victims understand the world's attention to Houston and a struggle between life and death that's no longer an issue here, but they need clean water, they need electricity, they need health care, they need help. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

Port O'Connor, where Category 4 Carla destroyed 90 percent of the town in 1961, suffered only minor damage this time. But that wasn't the case in Aransas Pass, where Debra Harmon and her fiancé of 31 years were holed up as the hurricane made landfall.

"I wish we could get electricity," Harmon said outside a unit at the rugged Paladin Rentals, where she stayed the night of the storm.

Everyone's doors are open to catch the sea breeze a few blocks from Corpus Christi Bay, power lines draped precariously at eye level and a stray Weimaraner that Harmon named Harvey sleeping on the cool floor just inside the door. Harmon's fiancé of 31 years would like the Whataburger restaurant to re-open, but it's the creature comforts she wants after being offered water from the back of a pickup truck.

"I've got enough water to float a battleship. I sure miss that air-conditioning," she said.

In the hardest-hit areas, residents are without power, water or sewer service, and in places where there's water, residents are being told not to drink it. Utility crews whose giant trucks clog neighborhood after neighborhood estimate it could take weeks to turn the power back on in some places.



In this Sept. 2, 2017, photo, the messages "Make Rockport Great Again" and "Down Not Out" are written at a destroyed home in Rockport, Texas. Rockport and Port Aransas bore the brunt of one of the strongest hurricanes to hit the United States. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

"Our kids have been relocated to San Antonio and enrolled in school while we try to clean up the mess. I have faith that everything will work out in the long run, we just have to push through," Leisa McPherson of Rockport said in an email after a week of assessing damage.

Although Harvey didn't take many lives down here—just one in a mobile home fire—it certainly disrupted them.

Wooldridge, the calculus teacher in a red "Seadrift Centennial 2012 T-shirt," emerged a mother hen for Seadrift by trying to line up meals for a larger share of the town's 1,400 residents. As congregants from a Baptist church served chicken on Thursday night, Wooldridge was trying to coordinate future meals with the town's other two major churches.

"People are asking me what we need. I don't know what to tell them," she said to the city's council as it met around a portable card table at City Hall five days after the storm. "I've got 800 chickens. Are the Methodists or the Catholics going to cook them?"

Fewer than 20 hurricanes to hit the U.S. have been as strong as Harvey, according to the National Hurricane Center, which retires the names of storms that are particularly nasty. Harvey fits the bill for its wind speed, barometric pressure and impact on human suffering, which isn't just in cities.



In this Aug. 31, 2017, photo beleaguered residents queue for food at a municipal building in Seadrift, Texas, while waiting on basic services to be restored. Hurricane Harvey hit the area six days earlier, knocking out power to the community. Local townspeople directed a response that led to churches in the town preparing meals for about a quarter of the town. (AP Photo/Kelly P. Kissel)

Harvey's coastal victims understand the world's attention to Houston's record flooding and a struggle between life and death that's no longer an issue here.

"It's all Houston, Houston, Houston," Carla Ray Sutherland remarked as Sargent tried to find people who would bring in bread to eat and bleach to clean.

"We've been put on the back burner, and we were ground zero," William Loosemore said, cooking brisket on an outside smoker in Fulton while counting utility trucks as they drove to a gathering spot at an airport. (He counted 703.)

Bob Campbell, a handyman with the nickname "Side Job," is sleeping for now on an air mattress and taking showers outside. Still, he's finding plenty of work building fences and a staircase at Moby Dick's—tasks that all appear to have survived the storm.

"There's so much work around here I keep telling him he could get rich," Ziegler said.



In this Aug. 30, 2017, photo, Bob Campbell drinks a beer as he surveys his property as he returns to his home in Port Aransas, Texas, for the first time following Hurricane Harvey making landfall. Harvey's coastal victims understand the world's attention to Houston and a struggle between life and death that's no longer an issue here, but they need clean water, they need electricity, they need health care, they need help. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Aug. 30, 2017, photo, Bob Campbell works to remove a tattered flag from a tree in his front yard after returning to his home in Port Aransas, Texas, for the first time following Hurricane Harvey making landfall. Harvey's coastal victims understand the world's attention to Houston and a struggle between life and death that's no longer an issue here, but they need clean water, they need electricity, they need health care, they need help. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Aug. 31, 2017, photo Pfc. Gustavo Rodriguez of Laredo, Texas, helps serve meals at the municipal building in Seadrift, Texas. The community was just on the edge of Hurricane Harvey's strongest winds and lost basic utility services during the Aug. 25 storm. (AP Photo/Kelly P. Kissel)



In this Sept. 2, 2017, photo, Bob Campbell works to restore his home following Hurricane Harvey making landfall as he dog, Bella, lies on the air mattress where it is sleeping until he can return to his home in Port Aransas, Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



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