



Almost like a “Where’s Waldo” image, you can spot a boat in the top right corner of this photograph. It depicts the worst devastation near North Fort Myers, Florida.



## Reflections of a River Rat:

After Ian’s rampage, NY transplants cope to find meaning in Thanksgiving

As our vehicle crept along the narrow lane between damaged homes, I underwent my Thanksgiving epiphany.

I’ll never whine about another humid night that inhibits your sleep. You can add heat waves, muddy fairways, snowstorms and blizzards. I’ve lived through them all. Bring’em on Mother Nature. But I’ll pass on the hurricanes.

Five weeks after Hurricane Ian lurched through Englewood, Rotonda West, Port Charlotte, Punta Gorda and North Fort Myers along Florida’s

Gulf Coast on Sept. 28, I was understanding the destruction that 125+ mph winds inflicted for more than 10 hours. At times, the wind reached 155 mph, and it deposited 15 inches of rain in 24 hours. Though it waned within 12 hours, the suffering continues today.

Those are weather-based facts. As I listened closely to my brother's voice, you gathered the sense of loss he felt for his former students and neighbors around Grove City, Fla. Generational family businesses were shattered, then left in ruin.

The people here are hardy folks who endured Hurricane Charley in 2004 on a similar path. It destroyed six of the 24 local schools in Charlotte County. By comparison, that storm was a toddler. It fit within the eye of this megastorm, which roared ashore with 150 mph winds and killed 109 people.

My heart immediately went out to the families living week-to-week, paycheck-to-paycheck in aging mobile homes along the Gulf of Mexico. The wind peeled open their homes like kitchen cans, scrambled all belongings, and drenched the contents with rainwater. Their streets are choked with small mountains of palm branches, stumps, rugs, easy chairs, drywall, refrigerators, hot tubs, white plastic fencing and household goods. One fearful man, trying to salvage his undamaged possessions, spraypainted a sheet of plywood with the warning: "You loot, I shoot."

The more I pondered their loss, the more I worried about the plight of North Country residents whose homes were damaged.

Sandy and Bill Adams of Morristown were tortured by the helplessness of watching live news reports and talking via telephone with their friends in North Fort Myers Beach. When Ian made landfall,



its wall of wind delivered a direct hit to their neighborhood, and eventually a 12-foot storm surge descended like a tsunami.



“Our home had four feet of water rush in that left a dirty, black residue on everything when it drained out,” Sandy said. “All our contents were ruined. Our new kitchen and new flooring were destroyed. All the furniture, tables, chairs, beds, dressers and everything in the drawers were ruined. The roof and windows need replacing along with all the doors.”

When the wind subsided and the skies cleared, the Adams arrived to begin the arduous cleanup.

“Everything was thrown out and piled high in the front of the house by the road,” she continued. “The fear is for the mold that can grow in the hot, humid air if there is any bacteria left. It almost seemed like looking at all this disaster and everyone's personal belongings on display and ruined. It was something you see on TV. Not real.”

“It was numbing and shocking at first until you began cleaning. No water, no sinks, no towels or electricity, and trying to figure out where to stay and what to do next. It was sad and shocking and tearful and



The hurricane-proof window, required by a Florida building code, remained intact, but the wall of the home fell in North Fort Myers.

overwhelmingly exhausting.”

My cousin, Colleen Holleran Jackson, a retired elementary school teacher, also winters in Nort Fort Myers, but faced minimal damage compared to the Adams.

“We lost some trim on the edge of our roof, and the gutters and downspouts,” she said. “But we were lucky.”

A neighbor’s roof flew off its moorings and punched a hole in their siding, but her neighbors

fared worse. They lost their carport, lanai, shed and the siding on the back of the house was ripped free. Several other neighbors sustained total losses.

Like Adams, Jackson felt the powerlessness of watching on TV from upstate New York, from her home in Mohawk.



**Beach buildings were obliterated when Hurricane Ian came ashore with 150 mph winds.**

“We’d seen pictures but they couldn’t even begin to show the extent of the damage,” Jackson said. “There are still piles and piles of debris all over Cape Coral and Fort Myers. We flew over Sanibel and the water was black and the island was decimated. Our community has been cleaned up and all debris removed.”

Of course, every disaster invites the unscrupulous who would benefit from a victim’s tragedy. Jackson told of the roofer who took one peek at the roof from a ladder, pronounced it totaled, then offered to repair it for \$17,000. He had no business card and likely wasn’t registered with the county. A reputable contractor arrived later, performed a thorough inspection, and estimated they should spend \$750 to replace some shingles, gutters and trim. Honesty never gets old.



My brother Fran left his history position at Hammond schools in 1981, opting for the Florida beaches and a 35-year career at Charlotte County schools. He and his wife, Mary Jo, hunkered down for 10 hours in a bedroom closet while the storm mimicked the noise and vibration of a passing freight train for 10 hours.

They lost a few palm trees and half an oak tree, endured some holes in their lanai screens, but emerged relatively unscathed. Since sawing and piling hundreds of branches along the road, they have played a daily game of listening for a truck's beeper. Their hopes rose last week until they learned a county truck was merely turning around. The pile remained. It might remain for another 3-5 months.



Sandy Adams

The piles, seemingly on every curb and road, offer a glimpse of what every family has lost. Each slab of drywall and wrecked stick of furniture remain as a cruel reminder of their tragedy.

Regardless of the damage, Adams retains an indefatigable spirit.

"You start realizing how blessed you are to have a home left, to have friends welcome you into their homes, money and insurance to help you, friends and neighbors to be with and offer comfort and help," said the Gouverneur native. "We are grateful for our health and to be able to figure out what to do next and to have a spouse to lean on for strength. For food and clothing. Thanksgiving will be a good reminder that faith, family and friends are the most important things."

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