



## Texas Tidbits

### TSMA's Very Own Hurricane Harvey Feel Good Story:

A Journey Through the Aftermath of Harvey  
by M. Helena Espinoza

There is no denying the fact that Harvey took much from my family and me. After leaving the increasingly fast paced suburbs of Clear Lake and purchasing a well sized property out in a small rural town, our family had only enjoyed two years of small town life before Harvey came through and washed it away. The second night of Harvey found us under siege, water quickly devoured our homes and fluctuated between thigh-high and waist deep. Under the blanket of night there was no way out, everyone moved to higher positions, and my daughter assigned everyone one trash bag and one backpack and instructed us to fill it with clothes, shoes and whatever we cannot live without. We kept a vigilant watch on water levels, prepared to move outside and on to roof if needed and waited for sunrise. In the early hours of daylight, a dump truck appeared out front and a group of young locals hopped out and made their way through to our front door. A team effort came about with neighbors networking to help me get my special needs granddaughter through the river of water safely. Ultimately, a kayak was used to get her through to the truck, my other granddaughter left her assigned bag on a high shelf choosing instead to carry her small dog and partner-in-crime named Shadow above her head and out of the water, my daughter and her big black Labrador swam together for the truck, their dad, Marcos, helped get the kayak across and then came back and loaded himself with every possible item he could think we would need and headed out. As we stood in the back of the old dump truck driving slowly through the chaos, destined for a make-shift shelter, we each silently realized that every part of our lives had just changed and there was no returning to this home or this life.

I could easily go on with the horrors that revolved around that night and following day at the shelter but instead let me focus on the moments that happened behind the scenes that I would later learn of and that would change mine and my family's outlook on Harvey. You see, during the night, my daughter called 911 and any other number she could find only to

be told there was no help coming and that frankly no one knew what to do or what was going to happen. She took to her social media and went on our town's Fb page and posted our address and situation. She sent out a blanket text to all her contacts reading a similar message. What we later learned was that the town acted immediately, people in our town and our neighboring town added us to a growing local list of those in need of rescue. At daybreak locals gathered together on their own, our town released city trucks for them to use, and the list that the townspeople had created was distributed. The effort of these people is how we came to be rescued. Next, the blanket text she sent out reached her cousin a Texas Army man who began a 12 hours mission to get us out of the shelter. After rescuing a stranded work friend, the two set out in an old Bronco and headed our way. The freeways were under water and were a free-for-all with vehicles going in any direction and at any speed. He stalled out, his vehicle flooding once he hit a surrounding town. We later found out this town was so far under water that it had basically trapped all help from reaching our area and the National Guards had to be called. Not to be deterred, her cousin soon met a local mechanic who was using his raised truck to help those stranded. He offered to help her cousin get to higher ground and her cousin replied, "If you do that you will just find me stranded again down the road, I can't stop until I get my cousin and her family out." The mechanic and his team acknowledged her cousin's determination and game planned a route to get to us. Shortly before sunset on the third night of Harvey, her cousin and the team of strangers he formed walked into the shelter, loaded us up and got us out. Again, we had been rescued by the efforts of those who worked tirelessly of their own accord and without our knowledge. Her cousin took us to his apartment and in the days to follow we watched as the waters neared but never entered his home.

After endless days, Harvey finally moved on and we were left to face the aftermath. No safe roads existed into our town and so we accepted that our homes, vehicles and anything that had remained was lost. I began endless calls to insurance agents, dug through a mountain of paperwork, checked in with work, and of course we filed with FEMA for our separate households. Plans were made to get the children to safety and secure a rental car from out of state. For a family that has been used to having homes a short walk away from each other, the reality that we would be scattered throughout the city hit hard. The grandchildren stayed in Oklahoma, my daughter and Marcos finally secured a room at a local motel through FEMA, and I moved into the guest bedroom of a friend. Again, the horrors of the aftermath were just as bad as the event itself but once more it was other factors that shined through the darkness. When the day came to return to the property, I arrived to find a team of volunteers consisting of friends and family, young and old, each coming from the far reaches of Katy, Waller, Cypress, Sealy, Alvin and more. Each carried supplies and a determination to work. What could be salvaged was and what could not be was piled high and filled the front yard. At the end of the day, I was again left stunned at the heart of so many. Again, I realized what Harvey took did not compare to what Harvey gave, hope.

Undoubtedly, we had trials, trying to explain two houses on one property with only one address because your town does not allow separate addresses lead to extensive rounds of calls and explanations. Two unknown strangers attempting to take advantage, claimed our address as their home to receive funds from FEMA. One of the inspector's report sent to FEMA was lost. The insurance adjusters were exhausted and over worked and horror stories from all over filled us with dread about the insurance process. However, we approached every agent with the courtesy Texas culture demands and with the positivity that the out pouring of kindness shown to us inspired. My daughter and Marcos routinely visited the FEMA centers and after the efforts of many agents the false claims were denied, and rental support was issued to them. My granddaughters returned to a well-furnished condo their parents were able to rent short term. I traveled out of town to pick up new vehicle and my daughter had hers shipped in from up north thanks to the swift action of our car insurance agent. While FEMA helped secure SBA loans for immediate housing repairs it wound up unnecessary, our flood insurance came through even faster than

expected and released funds. Again, small town living showed its heart and our contractor, a long-time town resident who employs a team of locals, had been in contact with us throughout everything and demo-ed and treated our houses knowing full well there was no time table on funding for such work by the insurance. His efforts saved much of the structure of our homes. Over the months FEMA has called to offer further assistance if needed and when the short-term condo rental ended, FEMA again offered hotel assistance. Our contractor's team worked tirelessly to get smaller house on property livable, and in the transition period between condo and small house we have used the hotel offer as needed. So, while I believe all parties (call centers, government agents, and insurance agents) were stressed and exhausted in the aftermath of Harvey each seemed dedicated to staying positive, helpful, and patient.

It has been a six-month journey so far, with many more ahead, but today we can see an end in sight. The interiors of our houses are near completion. Game plans for the exterior are in the works. So, we start a new chapter, in what seems like new homes. We wave to neighbors daily as they to continue to rebuild and we watch as businesses return. We plan for the future and we celebrate our life. Harvey took a lot away from many, it broke many, it continues to devastate many and we are aware of this and aware of our fortune in this journey. We are grateful for the heart of this small town, blessed by the friends, family, and strangers that worked tirelessly to see us through, and honored to part of a town, state and nation whose local, state and federal government worked diligently to aid in recovery for us all. Most of all inspired and thankful that my TSMA family never left my side and has been there to help to the best of their ability, both financially and more importantly emotionally.

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