

TWO HURRICANES

My niece, Madison, lives in Florida. She and her family evacuated as Hurricane Milton approached. I asked her to tell her story. Specifically, I asked her a) How she prepared; b) What she would have done differently c) What she learned
Here is her response:

Last Saturday afternoon, it became apparent that Milton was headed our way, and there was a good chance it was going to be more than just a tropical storm. Having seen how Helene had just brought 6' of storm surge floods into our neighborhood the week prior, we were anticipating we'd get double the water with Milton projected to be a direct hit to the Tampa area. Miraculously, with Helene, 6' of water didn't even touch our house. But 10-12' (typical surge levels for a direct hit Cat 3 or higher) would be devastating.

The "blessing" of a hurricane is that unlike a flash flood or earthquake, you have a good few days to prepare. You know it's coming, and you can follow weathermen's analysis to see where it'll hit and how powerful it will likely be. We did not want to risk or chance flooding/prolonged outages with little babies so we decided to evacuate. Can't move as quickly/change plans last minute when you have a baby and toddler in tow. At this point in our thinking, it was during the afternoon session of conference on Saturday. Mind you we were still recovering from Helene; Mike had been at a cleanup all morning, cutting drywall out of flooded homes, and I was running supplies to a low income community center nearby. So we put Helene relief on hold to immediately start preparing for Milton. It has been the longest 2 weeks!!

How we prepared - "Prepare for the worst, hope for the best"

I pulled out a piece of paper and just started writing down to-do's as they came to mind. We left the paper there to keep adding to, Mike had his own thoughts/things his dad would text him. (Yes, his dad and brother were both traveling internationally - great timing!) . Gas and cash were first priority. I went to the ATM and pulled out extra cash Saturday night. We already had some in our 72 hour kits, but wanted extra after seeing what's been going on in North Carolina. Remember, Tampa hadn't seen a direct hit

major hurricane in over 100 years, so we were preparing for the absolute worst. We made a game plan Saturday night for what to do Sunday and Monday AM, with the deadline to be on the road evacuating by Monday at 11 or noon. The storm wasn't scheduled to hit until Wednesday night, but evacuation traffic gets worse the longer you wait.

Sunday AM I filled up each of the cars, including the ones we were leaving here. Now, hindsight, with there being a serious gas shortage post-Milton, I'm really glad I did this. We spent the day on Sunday moving furniture and items high into the house. Mike boarded up the big glass slider to protect the glass from rushing water pressure, sandbag/tarped the exterior entrances and used Gorilla glue tape to seal the window/door seams. A friend had success doing this with Helene so we figured why not?! I went through our things and took the most important/precious keepsakes and my wedding dress to a friend's house inland. We moved antique pieces from Mike's parents to higher areas of the house, I put an antique bed in the attic. We moved all the cars inland to friends' driveways Sunday night, packed the car Sunday night, and then finished up prep by Monday AM.

We were on the road at noon on Monday, and it still took us 10 hours to complete a 4 hour drive up to my brother-in-law's in Jacksonville. We were well out of the storm's way in Jacksonville, so we spent Tuesday and Wednesday just enjoying time together, baking, watching movies, and the girls even went to get a much needed mani/pedi. Coming back to Tampa yesterday was much smoother. Filled up on gas before we got to the area.

It was a miracle late Wednesday night/Thursday AM to learn that the storm hit just south of the bay, producing a "reverse surge" where it sucked water OUT of the bay. Had the storm landed just north of Tampa, it would have been exponentially more devastating because the counter-clockwise spin of the hurricane would have pushed historic amounts of water into the bay and the area that was just overwhelmed with flooding from Helene. An enormous tender mercy from God.

What I'd have done differently/what I'm changing for next time:

- I didn't realize how exhausting prep for a flood is. This isn't really relevant for west coasters since hurricanes aren't as much a thing, but moving your house around/getting things off the ground/waterproofed is like a mini move. Look around your house. Anything under the first 2-3' up your floors is at risk. So any furniture with legs, furniture that touches the floor...all has to be moved if you want to save it.
- Next time I will wrap contractor bags around the piano legs to give them a fighting chance against water. I was worried about my mother-in-law's 100 year old Steinway more than anything. Luckily we didn't flood, but if we did, that would be an irreplaceable loss.
- Have a VERY specific evacuation list. What kinds of snacks you'll pack for the kids, how many diapers you'll bring, how many sets of underwear/clothes, how many X . I felt frazzled even with all the lists I'd made previously so anything to take the brainwork out of it, the better
- Pack pajamas you'll feel comfortable wearing in front of other people, and take a small hamper with you. It was nice to have somewhere other than a suitcase to put dirty clothes; made me feel less displaced.
- Test your generator even if you think it's fine. Turns out ours was broken so we had to throw out 3 fridges worth of food.
- Keep extra gas in your garage. It is crazy seeing people waiting in 2 hour lines, with cops on site to keep the peace.
- Luckily, I already had a 72 hour kit for everyone in our family and an Important Documents binder, that included an evacuation list. But with Milton I learned my evac list was not as nearly as detailed as it needed to be, as I hadn't accounted for prepping the whole house for possible flooding. So those have since been updated to a "hunker down" checklist where our biggest concern will be outages, and a "evacuation" checklist where our biggest concern will be flooding.

We went to a short sacrament meeting this morning with the other wards from our building, many members came dressed in yellow "Helping Hands" shirts and jeans, ready to go to work. No 2nd hour. The gospel in action, literally. This will be our new normal for at least the next 4 weeks. It seems like Helene devastated the

northern part of our stake and Milton got the south. There will be 2 command centers set up in our stake, one for the northern half and one for the southern. Starting next weekend, each command center will be supported by 5 additional stakes (so 10 outside stakes total) to get work done. It'll be about 600 volunteers organized into work crews for JUST our stake boundaries! It's amazing to see the church operate so smoothly in a crisis and it makes me cry just thinking about all the people ready to come to our aid. There is a lot of cleanup ahead of us but we will be just fine.

Thank you all for your love and prayers and checking in. God heard our prayers to weaken the storm, and the Tampa Bay Area got the "best case scenario" all things considered. We just got power back last night and will be moving back in from a friend's house early this week to start putting the house back together. There was no damage but it got pretty turned upside down trying to prepare it for flooding. Hurricane life is what my husband likes to refer to as "the price of paradise" and so no, I do not want to move out of Florida after the last two weeks. If anything, I am blown away by how people take care of each other here, and my love for our little community has grown even more. So come visit us next Spring once we're back to normal. I'll take you to the beach and you'll see what I mean ;)