

Irma's aftermath

Students, teachers and staff at Lakewood High School recall their experiences with Hurricane Irma, which struck the Tampa Bay area on Sept. 11.



Rain falls in the bus circle at the end of the day on Sept. 6. Pinellas County schools were closed for seven days due to the storm.

NICK STODDARD | SNN



A tree lies across a street in Pass-a-grille Beach more than a week after Hurricane Irma hit the Tampa Bay area. The storm, which was originally forecast to be a Category 5, came through the area as a Category 1. It knocked down numerous trees in the area and caused students to be out of school for seven days.

ALICIA LOPEZ | SNN



Sand bags sit in the back of VE Specialist Emily Cipolla's car before Hurricane Irma passed through St. Petersburg. Pinellas residents collected sand bags in case of flooding during the hurricane.

Special to SNN



Four dogs crowd in a packed car driven by a family evacuating Pinellas County before the hurricane hit on Sept. 11.

Special to SNN



Branches lay on the ground in a cemetery on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Street on Sept. 11. There was still left-over debris a month after Irma took its toll on the Bay area.

Special to SNN



A tree lies on top of a house on Pass-a-grille Beach more than a week after Hurricane Irma went through the area.

ALICIA LOPEZ | SNN



Rain falls on a truck as the storm begins to pass over Tampa Bay on Sept. 10.

Special to SNN



A group of volunteers stand in front of Dunedin Middle School the morning after Hurricane Irma swept through the Tampa Bay area. Assistant principal Laura Mudd volunteered at the school during the storm.

Special to SNN

Trees down, power out, no school

BY ALICIA LOPEZ

SNN Staff Writer

Freshman Tara Zipperer lives by the water and was forced to evacuate her home during Hurricane Irma. She went to her mom's job and volunteered because several nurses were leaving before the storm.

"People are gonna die," she thought. "(I) might as well help out."

Unless you've been living under a rock you know that Irma hit the Tampa Bay area as a Category 1 storm in the early morning hours of Sept. 11. Initially, it was unclear how powerful the storm was going to be. Reports at one point said it could have been Category 5, which caused the largest evacuation in Florida's history. In just a couple of days, 6.5 million people evacuated, one-third of the state's residents.

School was cancelled starting on Sept. 7, and in the end, all the students in Pinellas County missed seven days of school to both prepare and get situated after the storm.

In addition, due to a food shortage and power loss throughout the state, students in Pinellas County Schools will be receiving free breakfast and lunch until Oct. 20 in order to help students and their parents get back on their feet.

Students and staff at Lakewood had to make preparations for the storm, not knowing when it would hit or how powerful it would be.

"Although the exact trajectory of the storm and impact on our region remains uncertain, our community's preparedness and the safety of our employees and families are the priority," principal Erin Savage said on the day the district first canceled school.

Here, some tell their stories.

Many of those who stayed in Florida had to evacuate their homes, and they went to shelters for safety, which were several schools around the area. Assistant principal Laura Mudd said she volunteered at Dunedin Middle School during the storm.

"I had to help register people, help with parking, tell people that they can no longer bring pets with them because the pet center was full and help manage the floor that I was on," Mudd said.

Mudd stayed at the shelter from Friday to Monday morning during the storm. The power went out during the storm and the generator wasn't working, but two other assistant principals grabbed one from a close elementary school she said.

"I don't know if I really had time to be scared. We were working a good amount so I never really crossed my mind. I was worried about my house and my friends, but not really about my safety because I felt safe where I was at," Mudd said.

VE Specialist Emily Cipolla waited the storm out at her home with her family.

"I was a little nervous because we did not know how bad it was going to be," she said. "I cleaned out a closet for the family to sit in and we got water, food and we boarded up our windows."

Freshman Gabriel Paskevicius slept through the hurricane, but caught a glimpse of the debris and heard the chaos outside.

"I was scared when the power went out, because I saw (the movie) Annabelle that weekend," Paskevicius said.

On the way to pick up his grandmother from an evacuation zone, freshman Logan Coriale saw the effects of Hurricane Irma even before the storm hit the Tampa Bay area.

"We were going to pick her up the day before the storm (Sept. 10) and when we went over to her house there was already flooding and she was out of power," he said.

Many of the students at Lakewood and most of the area experienced power outages during and after the storm. Art teacher Jayce Ganchou didn't have power for almost a week.

"I slept outside (on my back patio) twice because it was cooler," Ganchou said. "Sleeping was difficult, but we eventually got a generator."

Freshman Josephine Richards said a tree fell onto her bedroom while she and her brother were in the room. Because Richards is the smallest of her family she had to go on her roof to cut up parts of the tree. Richards relocated to a hotel for the night due to her family stressing out over the power outage.

"It made me feel stressed and emotionally drained.

My dad is very laid back and he was stressed and scared," Richards said. "Ten years go by and you don't see that, that's how you know it's okay to be a little scared."

On the Thursday before Irma came to Florida, freshman Isabella Reynoso and her family decided to take a road trip to Pennsylvania to get away from the storm. On Friday, they took another three-hour drive to New York to visit family.

"At the time we left, (the news) said (Irma) would be a Category 5 and there would be flooding. I live by the water and we decided it wasn't safe to stay," Reynoso said.

Reynoso said it was scary to come back home and to see the damage, but she was just glad that her family was okay.

Students returned to school on Sept. 18 — missing a total of seven days of school.

Pinellas County school administrators decided that the students will only have to make up three days of school, which are on Monday, Oct. 16, Jan. 8, 2018, and March 12, 2018.

Hurricane Irma caused billions of dollars in damages and was the cause of dozens of deaths.

Zipperer, who volunteered at her mom's nursing home during the storm, ended up at the facility for the week. She said it was stressful, but she at least felt helpful.

"It was depressing," she said. "We stayed there for about a week and like five residents died."

— SNN Staff Writer Favian Manon contributed to this story.



Above, a boat sits above a canal in Snell Isle that was drained during the afternoon before Hurricane Irma hit.

Special to SNN

Left, Tampa Bay sits empty due to Irma pulling out the water, leaving behind seagrass. Irma's winds were strong enough to pull the bay's water into the Gulf of Mexico.

Special to SNN