

OPINION



A truck drives through a flooded subdivision in Port Charlotte, Florida, the day after Hurricane Ian made landfall, on Sept. 29. **JOHNNY MILANO/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

Lessons from surviving Hurricane Ian

By David McGrath

Meteorologists can predict hurricanes as soon as they're born and gauge their size, speed and time of arrival with increasing accuracy — though ascertaining their precise route remains a work in progress.

But science's limits, and the manner in which information is disseminated by television networks and other media, often place the lives of those they serve in greater jeopardy.

My conclusion is not that of a detached observer but as a survivor of Hurricane Ian, among the most violent storms in Florida's history.

Following the announcement that the storm would affect the Gulf Coast, likely near Florida's panhandle, the mood on our residential block in Port Charlotte was cautiously confident. Think of Chicago's massive blizzards, when neighbors turn friendly and helpful, joking about nature's capriciousness.

Unsurprisingly by last Wednesday, Ian's path had veered hundreds of miles farther south than predicted, and the storm surge projection for our coastal segment of South Gulf Cove increased to 12 to 18 feet from 3 to 6 feet. This potentially meant that we had roughly six hours before Charlotte Harbor's waters inundated our homes, driving us outside into salty floodwater filled with downed power lines, sharp and heavy debris, and alligators.

Marianne and I have been married

long enough to know each other's thinking. She watched me pace room to room, searching for batteries, life jackets and important papers, while I took note of her face and eyes as she monitored AccuWeather on TV.

"Ready?" I said.

"Let me get my Kindle," Marianne said.

We had decided ahead of time, along with our friends and neighbors Tim and Sarah, to shelter in place. Our houses are hardened for severe storms and elevated to stay dry in a substantial surge. Experience has taught us we are safer staying put than helping swell the chaos of statewide traffic — a decision Gov. Ron DeSantis recommended for those who could.

Since Tim and Sarah were already harboring two other couples, family also originally from Maine, we joined their party.

The entire country knows what happened over the next eight hours, as Ian's winds strengthened to 155 mph and turned sooner and sharper than forecast, making landfall at Cayo Costa, a barrier island near home where I camp and fish.

Over that same span of time, we got to know Tim's cousins Bob, Lil, John and Linda, residents of North Port. We swapped stories, ate ham sandwiches and sipped beer while monitoring Ian's progress with an old-fashioned transistor radio.

At 4 p.m., we had to raise our voices over the intensifying cacophony of banging corrugated metal shut-

ters. We took turns reporting what we could see outside through a slit between two shutters: another palm tree snapped in two and a 10-foot aluminum gutter sailing like a paper airplane. And then the power went out.

Tim turned on two lanterns, and Sarah retrieved a deck of cards. Seven stud proved an effective time filler, though no one could maintain their poker face whenever a sudden boom spelled a crash involving a building or a boat or a tree.

Tim scooted more frequently to the "viewing window," measuring with the long beam of a flashlight the water line on his neighbor's dock.

"Is it time to head upstairs to the second story?" I asked.

Sarah didn't think so. All of us, in fact, were skeptical of a super surge since there had never been one where we live. But we also acknowledged the rash of unprecedented weather events in recent history, so Tim maintained his vigil.

At 10 p.m., the shutters quieted. Ian had passed. Once again, no surge in South Gulf Cove.

The next day, a celebrity TV news reporter hitched a ride in a rescue motorboat south of here. He asked the first responder at the helm to find a victim of Hurricane Ian who would talk on air, and they coaxed a mother and her 6-year-old daughter onto the porch of their flooded mobile home.

"Why didn't you leave?" were his words. While his tone was incredu-

lous for the benefit of his audience, it translated as condescension toward anyone not wise enough to heed his network's warnings, some of which were not wrong — *this time*.

"We didn't think the storm would be this bad," she said, her daughter staring blankly at the camera.

Off-camera, she may have expressed her own astonishment at the inability of a media star with an eight-figure income to understand the calculation necessarily made by her and her neighbors.

That unlike for him, the usual low odds of dying in a hurricane constitute a risk she'll take over incurring the financial and psychological costs of evacuation.

And to maintain a grip on all that she has in this world.

More than 100 lives in Florida have been lost to Hurricane Ian.

Weather experts, government workers, civil engineers, charitable organizations and first responders deserve gratitude for doing all that they could to minimize that tragic number.

But the hope is that from lessons learned through Hurricane Ian, self-absolving mandates and overestimates will give way to more effective, practical help before and after the next storm.

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